

Focus groups and workshops

Interviews often seem like the most logical way to allow project participants, stakeholders or beneficiaries to speak openly about their experiences. Your project stakeholders might assume from the start that 'qualitative research' simply means interviews. But sometimes other methods are appropriate too.

The first of these to explore is the group interview, focus group, or workshop. You will hear all three terms used in slightly different contexts for what essentially amounts to the same thing, a method differentiated by the fact that you talk to several people at the same time, in a group. This lends itself to comparison with interviews, as we see below, where we explore the pros and cons of focus groups.

	Pros	Cons
Planning	Rather than needing to schedule numerous consecutive interviews, invite ten people to a one one-hour session instead.	This can be hard to plan, finding a good time for everyone. Use a tool like doodle.com to help with the scheduling. Consider doing a Skype group discussion.
Nature of the process	Some people might find a group discussion less formal and intense than a one-on-one interview. Many will thrive on that social, group dynamic.	Others might find it intimidating and therefore not speak openly e.g. if they were responsible for a project going badly. You may need to consider what is not said, as much as what is.
Giving up information and experiences	People may feel encouraged to give up their thoughts on a sensitive subject if someone else in the group has. An interview doesn't offer that encouraging prompt.	Anonymity amongst participants is not possible in a group context. You can stress that people shouldn't discuss what is said outside of the workshop, but you have little control over this.
People reminding and prompting each other	Where an interview answer might be 'don't know', the interaction of a group can remind people of practices they've engaged in, or their similar experiences.	The same dynamic also has the potential to put words into people's mouths, or influence them. Watch out for such power dynamics.
The opportunity for people to voice opinions	You can go around the group asking for everyone's opinions on a matter, and see where this develops patterns or themes at an early stage e.g. is there a group consensus.	You may struggle to ensure that everyone speaks, if one or two people dominate the discussion. Ensure you're confident in facilitating and have strategies for dealing with this.
The analysis process	Rather than multiple hours of interview to review, transcribe and analyse, you may end up with just one or two.	Can you tell who is talking on the recording? Is it one person stressing the same point in different ways, or different people? A good transcription company will be able to identify Person 1, Person 2, etc.