

Preparing for interviews

Interviews are a hugely insightful way to gather feedback and input from project participants, regarding progress of a live project or reflection on one that has finished. However, they also rely on you being able to talk to someone who is likely to have a busy diary. Given this, once you have arranged a time for interviews, there will be some pressure to make the best use of that opportunity. It is unlikely you would be able to return to them for a second attempt if anything goes wrong - the following questions serve as a planning checklist to ensure everything goes as smoothly as possible.

Do your questions address the evaluation brief?

This might seem obvious, but return to the brief - will you get the answers you need? Additional questions might seem 'interesting' but your interviewees won't appreciate it taking any longer than necessary, and it may be unethical to probe further than necessary. You'll also be grateful of this when you later analyse your materials.

Does the stakeholder or client know who will be interviewed?

It might be important to ensure with the project lead that you are interviewing the right people, a representative sample. Or it may be more appropriate for the stakeholder to provide you with a pool to choose from, but that you then do so without informing the stakeholder so that it allows interviewees to remain anonymous and potentially offer more candid insights.

Are your interviewees happy about being interviewed?

In some situations, interviewees may have been asked by stakeholders or funders to help, but they are essentially giving up their own time to do this. Try to establish how willing people were to be involved in the evaluation, or if they are very willing, what their agenda might be - interviews offer voice to project participants but there are usually two sides to a story, so this may need untangling in writeup.

Are you planning interviews with the interviewees' convenience in mind, rather than yours?

As described above, if interviewees are already offering their time, can you make this as convenient as possible? If it must be face to face, can you travel to them? Could it be carried out via phone or skype? You should be fitting around their schedule, as much as possible (although you may have reporting deadlines of your own).

Are your questions open, where necessary?

If they're largely binary (yes/no), could this be better served as a questionnaire or email? Open questions allow people freedom to tell their story and offer qualitative, narrative insight. But also ensure you can bring the discussion back on track when necessary - writing focused questions can help with this.

Can you prioritise certain questions if necessary?

What are the absolute mandatory questions that must be covered and that you might need to skip to if the interview runs over, or your interviewees speak for too long? And which questions are sub questions or not so important? Arrange them on your sheet of questions in a logical way for you. (You may find that some are answered in the natural flow of conversation, and can be skipped on the fly)

What 'data' do you expect to walk away with?

Even in the context of asking everyone the same set of questions from a script, you are still likely to interject with follow-up questions, either as part of turn-based dialogue, or asking people to expand on a point. But consider what you will end up with, and whether veering off script too far might reduce your chances of being able to summarise a group consensus or identify patterns and themes.

How will you analyse that data?

You may end up with recorded audio that then needs transcribing, or simply your own notes made during the interview process. But you need to think about what those final processes of analysis and write up are before starting interviews - don't interview so many people (or for too long) that you are overwhelmed with too much interview data.

Have you prepared / printed a script?

Use an [opening script](#) so that everyone is informed of the interview processes, the consequences, who will see the report, anonymity, etc. If you are interviewing several people consecutively in one day, fatigue can set in, so this ensures everyone gets the same treatment. This is also helpful if interviews are being carried out by more than one interviewer, standardising the process. If you are recording, start recording before this, to include the script, as evidence that protocols were carried out correctly.

Have you prepared / printed your consent agreement forms?

After your script, you'll need the interviewee to read and sign an agreement and consent form. Asking them to do this before they start answering questions ensures they are then prepared to speak, but to also withhold anything they want to. Print two copies of your appropriate version of a consent form - they should sign and date both, and give you one copy, whilst they keep the other.

Have you picked the best location?

A public place like a cafe may seem relaxed, but it is relatively out of your control with regards to noise and privacy. Visiting an office space may be convenient regarding the interviewee's time, but is it better for them to get away from their work space, so they feel they can be more candid? Sometimes people will be happiest coming to your location. As with many of these points, negotiate them with your interviewees as much as you can.

Have you picked the best time?

It will usually be best to carry out interviews during work hours, for everyone's sake. But in some cases it may be that people are too busy, and therefore they might be carried out in a cafe on the way home from work, or in the evening via telephone.

Have you scheduled enough time?

One factor in sampling interviewees might be to choose those who are likely to 'get to the point' as opposed to those who 'like to talk'. Nonetheless, you will probably need anything from 20 minutes to an hour, so ensure you've set aside appropriate time to find and meet each other, make drinks, start the script, do the consent forms, and then undertake the questions. If you're interviewing consecutively throughout the day, give yourself time for comfort breaks. If these are carried out at your own workplace, you might even have the luxury of someone acting as a 'runner' to meet people at reception and asking them to wait if you're running over time.

Are people likely to experience travel / parking delays?

Consider likely travel delays (check online on the day) and parking issues. Inform your interviewees of such arrangements before they arrive, and who they should report to when they arrive. Starting the day with a half hour delay will then mean that any consecutive interviews are also delayed, resulting in unhappy interviewees throughout, and potentially skewed data.

Should you provide drinks and snacks?

If it feels appropriate to the location and circumstances, and will make interviewees feel comfortable, yes. Even if the offer is not taken up, the thought will be appreciated.

Do you have a good, stable recorder that you've tested?

If you're recording in a public place like a cafe or a pub, will it pick up your conversation but without too much background noise, especially if it is to be transcribed later? Do you have a power supply or spare batteries if you're doing a full day of recordings? Is there a backup recording or note-taking method?

Do your interviewees know they will be recorded?

Let them know this at the recruitment stage, and that you're not using the audio itself, it is just to aid note-taking. If they are prepared for this, they'll be fine with it on the day. If it comes as surprise when they arrive, they might back out, or ask you to just take notes without recording.

Have you given your interviewees enough information about what will happen on the day?

There is a balance to strike: inform them enough to be happy to attend, but not so much that they feel pressure to prepare or do their homework. They shouldn't feel under any duress, and you are really after their immediate gut reactions to your questions. In some cases, especially if you ask for quantitative data such as attendance figures for an event, it may be necessary to give them time to find this, of course.

Have you done everything possible to make the interviewees as comfortable as possible?

On one hand, you do want people to take the interview seriously, and understand that their responses will be used in evaluating a project's success. On the other hand, they should not feel under pressure, anxious or distressed by the process. Does the room feel relaxing? Is there a simple 'escape route' for them to use the bathroom if necessary, or are you in the way? Have you made it clear they can stop you, ask questions, or abandon the interview?



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