

# Interviewing

Lecture to SI 501 – Uses of Information  
Dana Walker, Graduate Student Instructor

# Why We Collect Data

- Learn about things we don't know
- Learn about settings and processes we haven't worked in
- Understand processes from the point of view of the user so you can make recommendations based on their needs



# Data Collection Methods

- **Collecting Materials**

- e.g. organizational charts, job descriptions, marketing materials, work flow artifacts

- **Observation**

- Direct observation of how people complete tasks, work in their environment, utilize their space, etc.

- **Interviews**

- Asking people to describe how they do their work, how they think about their work, etc.



# Multi-Method Approach in 501

- **Combining Methods**

- All three methods are combined in most 501 projects

- **Why?**


- Provides a more holistic viewpoint
- Allows for triangulation of data
- Gives a richer contextual understanding



# Interviewing Styles

- Range of interviewing styles based on the amount of structure imposed on the interview

**Structured**                      **Semi-structured**                      **Unstructured**



*directive &  
standardized  
survey questions*

*used mainly for  
quantitative  
studies*

*non-  
standardised*

*flexible list of  
themes and  
questions*

*non-  
standardised,  
non-directive,*

*in-depth  
exploration of an  
area.*



# Semi-Structured Interviewing

- **Characteristics**

- Interviewer has an idea of the information they want to collect
- Scripted, but flexible
- Asks pre-developed, often open-ended questions, encourages follow up and probes



# Getting Started – Before the Interview

- Who to interview (sample)
- Where to interview (context)
- Who will be the interviewer (interviewing roles)
- What you will and will not do with the data collected (ethical considerations)
- What to ask (creating a script)



# Who and Where

- **Who to interview (sample)**
  - Cross-section of people involved in the process
- **Where to interview (context)**
  - Trying to understand a process in context so interview in the workplace



# The Interviewer: Team Interviewing Roles

- **Interviewer**

- Asks questions, guides the interview, probes for details and depth
- Maintains pacing and flow

- **Note-taker**

- Takes detailed notes and may ask follow up questions



# What you will do with the data: Ethical Considerations

- **First Principle: Do No Harm**

- Imagine if the information you are gathering might be used for harm

- **Confidential**

- Don't talk about other people
- Anonymize the data

- **Informed**

- What you are collecting?
- Why you are collecting that information?
- How will the information they reveal be used?



# What to Ask: Interview Guides

## INTRODUCTION

### TASK AT WORK

Where is R in work flow system?

How does R's work come to him? Who brings it or assigns it, how?

How does what R does involve him with others?

### SPECIFIC TASK

Ask R to walk you through a specific task, yesterday (or while you are there).

What started/triggered the task? What happened then? When did it stop?

### CLOSING

Thank R

Ask R if there was anything they would like to add



# Introductions

- Purpose of interview and analysis
- Confidentiality assurances
- Completely voluntary
- Start to build rapport (listening, pacing, non-verbal cues)

---

*“Thank you for agreeing to talk with us. We are graduate students in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. The purpose of this interview is to better understand X. We expect our conversation will take about an hour. At times we may ask you to show us how you complete specific tasks. After our data collection is complete we will provide a final report of our findings to X. Please note that your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer every question and you may terminate your participation at any time. Your identity will remain confidential and your comments will not be specifically associated with you in our report to X.”*



# Body of Interview

- **Think of your objectives for the interview**
  - What do you need to know?
  - What are you trying to understand?
  - Translate those into specific questions and subtopics
- **Question Sequence**
  - First question should be planned and easy to answer
    - “*First of all, would you tell me a little bit your position. . .*”
  - Follow a reasonable organization – don’t force your respondent to jump around
  - Be open to change – follow the respondent’s train of thought



# Interview Guide

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. Thanks for talking to us
2. Purpose of interview
3. Confidential and voluntary

## **TASK AT WORK**

1. Where is R in work flow system?
2. How does R's work come to him? Who brings it or assigns it, how?
3. How does what R does involve him with others?

## **SPECIFIC TASK**

1. Ask R to walk you through a specific task, yesterday (or while you are there).
2. What started/triggered the task? What happened then? When did it stop?

## **CLOSING**

1. Thank R
2. Ask R if there was anything they would like to add

# Getting Depth and Detail

- **Main Objective: Collect Detailed, In-Depth and Rich Data**
  - Go beyond superficial accounts
  - Get to concrete descriptions
- **The Challenge**
  - People aren't aware of what they do – habitual and unconscious and hard to articulate
  - People often speak in generalities
  - People are likely to only hit the highlights of what they do



# How to Get Depth and Detail

- **Ask open-ended questions**

*“Can you tell me what this organization’s main goal is?”*

- **Avoid too many closed questions**

- Make it hard to answer with one word

*“Is this organization’s goal to provide inexpensive housing to students?”*

- **Don’t Ask in Generalities**

- Don’t ask *“What do you do in a typical week?”*, Ask for specifics

*“Last week, how many times did you do X?”*

*“Could you walk me through the last time you . . .”*

- **Ask “how” instead of “why” questions**



# During the Interview: Prompts, Probes, and Follow Ups

- **Prompt memories**

- Use artifacts (draw a flow chart, use a calendar)
- Ask people to show you how they do something
- Walk through processes with people step-by-step

- **Probe and follow up for detail**

- Probe and follow up questions are critical and difficult
- Your job is to help the respondent to give you the kind and depth of information that you want



# When You Need to Probe or Follow Up

- **Oversimplification:**
  - You need them to elaborate or fill in detail
    - “Could you tell me a little more about that?”*
    - “Can you draw that for me?”*
- **You don’t understand something or you are missing information:**
  - You need a clarification
    - “What did you mean by. . .”*



# When You Need to Probe or Follow Up

- **You aren't getting the full story**
  - **You can ask them to extend the story**
    - What led to an incident (*"How did that start?"*)
    - Consequences of the incident (*"What happens then, what do you do next?"*)
  - **Ask for examples**  
*"Can you give me an example of. . ."*
  - **Ask about others involved**  
*"Who else was there when you did that?"*  
*"Did you talk to anyone else?"*



# Probes don't have to be questions

- **Listening/attending behaviour**

*Uh-huh.*

*Then?*

*I see.*

*Tell me more.*

*Go on.*

*Anything more?*

*Nodding. . .*



# Tips on Getting Depth and Detail

- **How do you know if you are being given enough detail?**
  - Visualizability
  - Can you call up the scene and imagine what is happening in the setting being described?
- **Do not probe or follow up on everything, only probe on things that are key to your project**
- **Note keywords that you want to follow up on later**



# Difficult Moments

- **Wandering: How to redirects**

- You don't want to shut down the interview, but it is your job to focus on what is important

*“This is a really interesting story, but I am worried about our time. I would really like to hear you talk about. . .”*

- **Pacing: Avoid rushing to get through**

- **Non-Response: Non-verbal cues**

- **Avoid **biased** or **leading** questions**

- Don't answer your question for them

*“Don't you think that. . .”*

*“You like this, don't you. . .”*



# Concluding an Interview

- **Thank the participant**
- **Ask them if they would like to add anything**
  - “Do you have anything you would like to add?”*
  - “Is there anything you would like to tell me that I haven’t asked you?”*
- **Ask if they are willing to answer more questions at a later date**
  - “Can I contact you if I have further questions?”*



# Other Considerations

- Interviews are tiring, don't try to do 3 or 4 in one day
- Don't talk about the interview until after you leave the building!
- To audio record or not to audio record?
- Interviewing skills are honed with practice
  - Pilot your interview
  - Ask for feedback on your guide
  - Guides are flexible! Revise questions that aren't working

