

1. Better interviewing for better requirements

1.1. Executive summary

Good interviewing is very difficult for most people because there are rarely any good courses on it. Psychology and the specific areas of counselling and clinical psychology have a lot to say about good interviewing, especially in terms of identifying the real issues someone is experiencing, as well as the causes and consequences.

The interviewing process is about understanding the needs of a person, demonstrating empathy and that understanding and then determining the most appropriate course of action. The same process can be used in organisational or customer settings where we need to clearly understand the staff member or customer and determine their specific requirements.

That doesn't mean that the interview suddenly turns into a counselling session. Rather, it's about:

- ◀ Establishing rapport
- ◀ Encouraging communication
- ◀ Asking the right questions
- ◀ Active listening
- ◀ Summarising and consolidating what you've heard
- ◀ Managing bias
- ◀ Trouble shooting difficult interviews.

But aside from that, it's really about treating the interviewee with due care and respect. Most people have experiences where they're asked what they want and what they end up getting bears little or no resemblance. It happens because the interviewer wrote down what s/he heard, filtered through their own views. This 'reinterpretation' means the needs end up reflecting the interviewer's, not the interviewee's.

This article is about what makes for good interviewing and how to ensure you accurately capture what people have really said, why they said it (the causality) and put aside your own biases. It is not about how to structure an interview script, rather it is focussed on the social dynamics of the interview.

Further, although it is about improving interviewing skills to get better requirements, you should note that interviewing people is one of the weakest requirements gathering methods. This is because what people say they do is not often what they actually do. If you rely on the interview alone, you will miss major requirements. You are better off observing and documenting people at work. You can then use the interviewing skills learned here to ask the users about what you observed.

1.2. Common mistakes and practices

We see a number of common mistakes when watching people interviewing. You might have done some of them yourself. These are:

- ◀ Asking a question, getting an answer, and going straight on with the next question, instead of exploring the provided answer
- ◀ Not following a key thread from a given answer
- ◀ The interviewee says the same thing many times, thinking you haven't listened to them
- ◀ Jotting down an answer and not asking the reasons behind it, then you review your notes and wonder why the interviewee said that
- ◀ The interviewee often says 'didn't I just answer that earlier?' or 'I just said that'
- ◀ You say 'so you do that because...', and the interviewee frequently says 'no, that's not it...'
- ◀ Asking too many closed questions, getting monosyllabic answers, and having the interview end in half the expected time
- ◀ Finding that your notes don't help with defining the end users' requirements, so you fill in the gaps with what you think they meant

1.3. Establishing rapport

Establishing rapport with interviewees, whether they are clients in a stakeholder interview, users in a requirements workshop, or participants in a usability testing session, is essential as it helps put them at ease, encourages greater participation, and facilitates a more open, honest discussion.

There are a number of ways to build rapport. Generally, a good way to build rapport at the start of the session is to introduce yourself and your role, thank participants in advance for attending, and explain the purpose of the session, and the value of their views/opinions. You may then want to encourage participation by allowing the interviewee/s to introduce themselves and, if appropriate, describe what they do.

Doing this before diving straight into your agenda helps acknowledge the interviewee/s and helps put everyone on the same page by orienting them to the purpose of the interview/workshop and the kind of information you are looking for.

1.4. Attending behaviour: Encouraging communication

Various forms of non-verbal attending behaviour can be used to maintain rapport and continue to encourage communication throughout the session. These include:

1.4.1. Eye contact

- ◀ Eye contact indicates interest, and that you are hearing what is being said
- ◀ Establishing eye contact with quieter participants in a workshop and asking for their thoughts on a particular topic or question can help enable participation. This can be especially useful if a couple of participants are dominating the group.
- ◀ But don't stare them down by maintaining extended eye contact – this makes people feel very uncomfortable as they feel under the spotlight.

1.4.2. Body language

- ◀ Maintain an open, relaxed stance/position. Sit upright, leaning forward towards the person slightly and have your arms open. One hand may rest on the desk, and the other near the notepad to write on. Don't cross your arms and don't lean right back in the chair.
- ◀ Be aware of interviewees' body language. If participants are adopting a closed position, this may indicate that the group (or individual) is not yet comfortable or trusting of the situation. In this case, it may be appropriate to reiterate that you are interested in their opinions, and that responses will not be linked to individuals.

1.4.3. Silence

- ◀ Rather than trying to fill every gap or lull in the discussion with your own talking, be aware that silence can at times be useful. Sometimes participants are waiting for a break in the discussion to contribute a new perspective, or introduce an unexpected issue. Especially in one-on-one interviews, silence can encourage a more conversational flow to the interview and result in a more comprehensive understanding of the issues.
- ◀ If silence is reflecting a general non-responsiveness, it can help to go around the group and individually engage participants. In a one-on-one situation, breaking the question down into questions that have more obvious, straightforward responses, can help generate greater participation.
- ◀ Silence also gives people time to think about what they will say next, for both the interviewee and the interviewer.

1.5. Questioning techniques

Questions provide interviewees with a frame of reference, and guide the way in which they discuss in issue. The ability to question intentionally is critical to elicit the information you require within time constraints, and keep the discussion relevant.

Questions fall broadly into two categories: Open and Closed questions.

1.5.1. Open questions

Open questions are those that have no specific response, and are difficult to answer in a few words. They encourage interviewees to talk and provide you with maximum information. Open questions typically begin with: "What", "Why", "How" or "Could". For example, "Why do you feel the current site is problematic?". Such questions are most useful when you have a very loosely defined idea of the issues, such as in broad brush requirements workshops.

Open questions are also critical so you let the interviewee express their views, rather than you asking questions as if you are trying to prove a point. If you ask only the questions that you know will get the answer you want, you'll only get more of what you've gotten. Open questions let people express their views in a non-threatening way.

Open questions are useful to:

- ◀ Begin an interview
- ◀ Obtain information
- ◀ Encourage elaboration and allow interviewees to expand on what has been said. For example, "Tell me more about...", or "When you say..., what exactly do you mean?"
- ◀ Elicit feelings related to a particular issue
- ◀ Encourage participation

1.5.2. Closed questions

Closed questions generally have a limited number of alternative responses, and can be answered in a few words or sentences. They help focus the responses of interviewees and validate information. As such, closed questions are typically more common in workshops or interviews intended to validate prototypes. Closed questions typically begin with: "Is", "Are" or "Do". For example, "Do you always print names on the envelopes before mailing them?"

Closed questions are useful to:

- ◀ Narrow the topic of discussion
- ◀ Obtain specific information
- ◀ Identify parameters of a problem or issue
- ◀ Contain a dominant participant and give focus to back to the group or session

When using closed questions, be careful not to 'fire' them at the interviewee, or make it sound like they've done something bad.

Make sure you don't put words in people's mouths, for example, 'the intranet is pretty bad isn't it?'. People have a tendency of agreeing with what the interviewer thinks (called demand bias).

1.6. Active listening: Responding to participants' responses

To facilitate continued participation, and help prevent participants losing interest, you have to let participants know that their opinions are being heard and understood. This can be achieved by encouraging, clarifying, paraphrasing and reflecting what has been said.

1.6.1. Encouragers

Encouragers prompt participants to continue talking. They include verbal and non-verbal forms of communication including: nods, open-handed gestures, and comments such as "uh-huh", "yes", "ok".

1.6.2. Clarifying

Clarifying an interviewee's statement allows you to check accuracy, reduces the risk of misinterpreting vague messages, and communicates that you value their perspective. Clarification questions include: "Do you mean...?", "Are you saying...?".

1.6.3. Reflection

Whereas clarification allows you to check your interpretation of the content of an interviewee's message, reflection involves rephrasing the affective part of an interviewee's comment, and allows you to check your interpretation of their emotions.

This technique can be effective in separating interviewees' feelings from the main issues. Specifically, by reflecting back the affective component of interviewees' responses, you can acknowledge and validate their feelings and then move on to discuss the issue in a more solution-oriented manner. For example, "The technical problems associated with your intranet have obviously caused you a lot of frustration. I can understand that. What features would you like to see available?"

1.6.4. Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing an interviewee's response involves rephrasing the content of their message. Rather than parroting back what you have heard, use some of your own words, plus the key words used by the interviewee. This helps communicate that you have understood their point, and helps them focus on the information they are providing.

Listen then for the interviewee to confirm that you have played it back to them accurately. They can then add further detail or re-state their position if you haven't got it quite right.

1.7. Summarising: Consolidating information obtained

Summarising is similar to paraphrasing, but covers more information. Summarisations typically consist of two or more paraphrases or reflections that condense the interviewee's message.

So whereas paraphrasing covers the content of an individual statement, summarising covers the content of the interviewee's overall message. Summarisations can be used to end a session, end and transition to a new topic, or to clarify a lengthy/complex issue.

They tie together multiple elements, and identify common themes or patterns. Most importantly, summarising is a useful technique to review progress and consolidate and validate your interpretation of the information gathered.

1.8. Managing bias

Ensuring the information you obtain through the interview is indicative of the actual situation rather than an artefact of the interview or the individual interviewee's perceptions is critical to ensuring you obtain accurate information on which to base your conclusions and determine the appropriate course of action. The following section outlines key biases to be aware of during the interview process.

1.8.1. Interviewer expectancies

Your own expectations can bias the information you obtain from the interview by causing you to selectively record or ignore responses, or place a disproportionate amount of importance on responses that fit with your expectations.

Ways of managing your own biases include:

- ◀ Not entering an interview with predefined or preset ideas of issues you expect to find.
- ◀ Being open to what interviewees tell you and following up all potential issues rather than those expected

1.8.2. Hypothesis-guessing

Hypothesis-guessing is a form of bias that occurs when interviewees try to guess what the interviewer expects and provide responses consistent with these expectations to please the interviewer.

Ways of minimising the risk of hypothesis-guessing include:

- ◀ Informing interviewees of the purpose of the interview.
- ◀ Explaining that you are acting as an independent party, and that their responses will remain confidential.
- ◀ Refraining from asking leading questions that prompt interviewees.

1.8.3. Evaluation Apprehension

In addition to interviewees trying to guess what the interviewer expects, they may also provide biased responses to ensure a favourable personal evaluation. Specifically, research has shown that people are apprehensive in situations in which they feel they are being evaluated by an expert (Rosenberg, 1969). This may be particularly true when interviewing employees of a client organisation who may suspect the interview is a performance monitoring exercise initiated by management. Such apprehension sometimes results in interviewees presenting a biased view of themselves or their situation so as to be evaluated favourably by the interviewer.

Ways of managing biases related to evaluation apprehension include:

- ◀ Ensuring interviewees understand that the purpose of the interview is to gain insight into business requirements.
- ◀ Focusing the dialogue on processes and situations rather than on the individual.
- ◀ What people say they do, and what they actually do are not always one and the same. Ideally, interviewing will be supplemented by an additional source of information such as performance reports, manager/supervisor ratings or onsite observations.

1.8.4. Situational Biases

Interviewee responses may also be biased by the actual interview situation itself. Specifically, since interviews are conducive to people receiving attention and feeling heard and validated, they may also alter peoples' perceptions of their current situation, and prime them to give biased responses that are disproportionately positive. This effect is referred to as the Hawthorne Effect after research studies of the same name in which workers' increased productivity was mistakenly attributed to changes in illumination when in fact this change was due to the attention received by workers during the process.

Ways of managing situational biases include:

- ◀ Being aware of this potential confound and validating the information obtained through the interview with management or onsite observations.
- ◀ Probing for more information and specific examples.

1.9. Troubleshooting difficult interviews

During the interview, you can experience some difficulties, such as when the interviewee:

- ◀ Doesn't say anything, or gives monosyllabic answers
- ◀ Is hostile, angry or has an 'axe to grind'
- ◀ Is continually sidetracked by irrelevant issues

1.9.1. When the interviewee doesn't say anything

Here are some techniques for when the interviewee doesn't say anything:

- ◀ Try asking different questions,
- ◀ Ask open questions, initially, then move to a few closed, easy questions to get the interviewee talking,
- ◀ Don't bombard them with too many closed questions,
- ◀ If the interviewee is still unresponsive, ask them if there is anything else they'd like to say, or if they'd like to reconvene the interview for another day. There is no point persisting with an uncomfortable situation.

1.9.2. When the interviewee is hostile

Here are some techniques for when the interviewee is hostile:

- ◀ Let them vent on the issue for a few minutes
- ◀ Thank them for the candour in describing the difficulties they are facing. Say something like 'would you like me to follow up on that issue'
- ◀ Say 'this interview is about determining the causes behind those issues so we can address them' (assuming that the interview is actually about those issues)
- ◀ If the interviewee continues to revisit old ground, thank them again, and remind them of the purpose of the interview and that you'd like to get as much information as possible about how to solve the issues.
- ◀ Consider reconvening the interview for another day, when they have had time to cool down.

1.9.3. When the interviewee is continually sidetracked by irrelevant issues

Some people just like to talk. Here are some techniques for when the interviewee always gets sidetracked:

- ◀ Remind them of the purpose: 'This interview is about your requirements for the ABC application. Can you tell me about...'
- ◀ You can make an overt statement such as: 'Thank you for those points, however, we need to stay on the topic. The question was...'. Take care to not be condescending or overly authoritative.
- ◀ As a last resort, if the interviewee continues to be sidetracked, consider closing the interview and finding a person who can provide better information.

1.10. Conclusion

You can see that interviewing is not just about asking a bunch of questions and thinking you'll get great answers. You need to really think about what you are doing to ensure people feel as though they've said everything they want to, and that your questioning and listening has actually gotten everything that they wanted to say.

You need to think on your feet and not follow your script dogmatically. The social interaction is dynamic, yet constrained within the overall purpose of the interview. Your management of the interview needs to be about preserving the esteem of the interview and get rich and detailed information to help you decide:

- ◀ What to do more of
- ◀ What to do less of, and
- ◀ What to do differently.

1.11. References:

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2. About the primary Author

Craig is the founder and Managing Director of The Performance Technologies Group (PTG Global), with over 15 years in user experience, user interface design and change management.

Craig runs the R&D function at PTG, having produced a number of world firsts including XPDesign – the first systematic methodology for user interface design and Certified Usable – the first guarantee for usability and user experience.

Craig has been the primary architect behind many of Australia’s most popular websites including CBA, Virgin Blue and ASIC and works on cutting edge technologies such as touch, medical and special-purpose applications.

Craig holds a Masters qualification in organisational psychology, is a member of the APS and the APS College of Organisational Psychologists and is a Registered Psychologist in NSW. He is also an Associate of the University of NSW and Macquarie University.



Contact Craig on:

- Email: craige@ptg-global.com
- Phone: +61 (0)2 9251 4200
- Mobile: +61 (0) 416 266 216
- Address: Level 16, 207 Kent St, Sydney, NSW, 2000, Australia