

# QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW: INTERMEDIATE SKILL DEVELOPMENT



## WHAT is it?

The in-depth or semi-structured interview is widely used in evaluation. Qualitative interviews can assist in finding out things that cannot be directly observed. The purpose of interviewing is to allow us to enter the other person's perspective and enables a focus on the participant voice. Although an interview guide is used to assist the process, the main instrument of the qualitative interview is the interviewer (i.e. the person conducting the interview). Skill development in qualitative interviewing focuses on improving the process of interviewing and the resulting product (the recorded interview or interview transcript).

## WHY is it important to develop skills?

The product of qualitative interviewing (a recorded interview or interview transcript) is a key building block of evaluation. The quality of the evaluation results, conclusions and recommendations is dependent on each of these interviews for its integrity. To achieve and maintain good-quality interviews for evaluation data or evidence requires constant practice and reflection by those conducting the interviews. Interviewing is a mix between art and science, requiring skill, sensitivity, concentration, interpersonal understanding, insight, mental acuity and discipline.

Common myths of interviewing:

- **Interviewing is easy - WRONG**  
A skilled interviewer or evaluator is able to make an interview look easy, however there are many skills (including active listening) required to do it well and mastery requires a lot of practice.
- **An interview is just a conversation - WRONG**  
In-depth interviews are much more one-sided than a typical conversation. The interviewer needs to focus on active listening and obtaining information both verbally and non-verbally, rather than focusing on their own opinion of the topic. They also have to constantly identify if the conversation is relevant to the topic being evaluated and steer the interview when it goes off topic.
- **Only a seasoned professional can obtain worthwhile data - WRONG**  
If a beginner evaluator or interviewer prepares well, is well familiar with what sort of information needs to be gathered and approaches the interview with openness and curiosity, a lot of data is able to be gained as the new interviewer builds their experience.

## THE ART OF INTERVIEWING IN TWO SENTENCES!

*"You can never really know what is going on for someone else.*

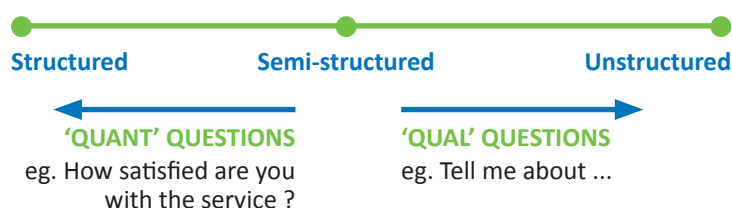
*The longer you can suspend certainty and closure, the closer you get to the truth."*

Judy Apps 2014



## WHAT does semi-structured mean?

Interviews can be seen to be on a continuum from structured questions of an outcome survey where respondents choose from multichoice categories, to very unstructured interviews where the interviewer seeks to find out more about something without setting any questions in advance. In a semi-structured interview the topics and questions are prepared in advance in an interview guide. The interviewer has the freedom to ask the questions in different ways for different participants. A semi structured interview also enables new ideas to be brought up and the interviewer to divert to ask new questions and further explore responses and topic areas.



## HOW to conduct an in-depth interview and build evaluation interviewing skills

The basic steps of preparing for an in-depth interview are covered in the **INFORMATION SHEET- Qualitative Interview Basics**. Here we focus on the interview itself and how to use your interviewing experience, recording, transcript and notes to build on and improve your interviewing skills.

*“Judgement, whether openly expressed or not, severely inhibits free conversation. Get curious instead”*

Judy Apps 2014

### THE INTERVIEW ITSELF

- 1 Build rapport:** key to rapport are respect for the person being interviewed, their knowledge, experiences, attitudes and feelings. Empathy and understanding is conveyed without judgement. The best interviewers approach each interview with curiosity and make a conscious decision prior to the interview to not ‘judge’ the person being interviewed (or ‘interviewee’).

  - Rapport ‘by proxy’ may assist with building rapport with participants who the interviewer has not met before. This is when a person who has built a strong relationship with a participant over time, introduces you and the purpose of the interview to the participant face-to-face. For example, a staff member working closely with a client over a period of months could introduce the interviewer (e.g. another staff member) to the client and spend the time together explaining the purpose of the interview and the role of the interviewer.
  - Make a positive first impression through dressing appropriately. Cultural considerations of dress code and greeting are important as they create a first impression and can have a major impact on participant comfort and reaction to the interview situation. Do your research before hand and consult with the target group about dress code and appropriate greeting and behaviours (eg. handshake, eye contact).
  - Arrive early and be prepared by reviewing the purpose of the interview and interview guide and checking any equipment you are using.
  - Choose a comfortable way to be in relation to each other for the interview. Settle into yourself. If you feel comfortable, this will help the interviewee to feel comfortable too.
  - If you are using digital equipment make sure you are comfortable with it first.
- 2 Ask questions in a clear and precise way:** ask questions one at a time. Avoid double barrel questions, such as “how did you find out about the program and why did you come along?” Also avoid asking ‘why’ questions, as this assumes there is a specific reason why things occur and such reasons are knowable. ‘Why’ questions can be difficult for participants to both understand and answer. Avoid asking several questions in a row. Make sure you give time for the person to consider and expand on their response.
- 3 Use probes to deepen and expand responses to questions:** probes are critical in gathering important and necessary information. The first answer an interviewee provides to a question does not often get to the core or heart of what they want or need to say. It is only when the question is followed up with a probe such as “what else” or some silence that provides them with enough time to consider their response that the interviewee is able to express the response that is most important. Probes may also assist with maintaining focus on deepening the response and getting a fuller picture of the topic of focus. Examples of probes include:

  - Detail-oriented probes are the basic “who”, “where”, “what”, “when”, and “how” questions to get a more complete and detailed picture.
  - Elaboration probes are used for when an interviewer wants a respondent to talk more about a subject. E.g. “could you expand on that?”, or “anything else?” **Reflect back and repeat words or messages conveyed by the interviewee to encourage further explanation.** These probes also show the interviewee that you are listening.
  - Clarification probes are used naturally and gently to tell the interviewee that you need more information, or a restatement of an answer, or more context. Reflect back to them what you are hearing and encourage further explanation. After one or two attempts at a clarification probe, it may be best to move on to other questions or perhaps return to the topic at a later point.

- 4 Listen:** connection with the interviewee is through listening to their experience. Although it can be tempting for the interviewer to share their own perspective, it is important to minimise this sharing. Some sharing of mutual experiences can be helpful for rapport but it is important to remember that this is different from a normal conversation. The focus should be maintained on the interviewees experience and perspective. Active listening skills to focus on include:
- Use inviting body language such as leaning forward to listen with more focus, nodding and encouraging and mirroring (copying participant body language when appropriate).
  - Look frequently at the person if they are looking at you as they speak. If they look away to describe something, then join them in their focus.
  - Observe and respond to non-verbal cues from participant. Note when they are silent because they are considering a response or when they might be looking uncomfortable or tired.
  - Minimize distractions or being rushed.

**5 Focus on understanding the interviewee’s story and refrain from judgement:** we are frequently judging ourselves and each other when in conversation. Awareness of this can support you with refocusing on what is being shared in the moment. Judgement, whether openly expressed or not, severely inhibits free conversation. Get curious instead.

**6 Follow the participants’ lead:** if the conversation naturally flows to a different topic that is still relevant to the interview, go with it. This increases the conversational flow of the interview. This is where interviewing becomes an art. The skill is knowing what information is relevant and keeping the interview on track if it shifts to topics not relevant to the interview purpose.

**7 Keeping the interview on track:** this can be achieved through asking the right questions, giving appropriate verbal and non-verbal feedback. E.g. head nodding, taking notes, “uh-huhs” as well as silent probes such as remaining quiet when a person stops talking. If a person gives a long-winded response or gets off topic and non-verbal cues such as stopping nodding your head or taking notes does not work, examples of interruptions can be:

*Let me stop you here, for a moment. I want to make sure I fully understand something you said earlier (then ask a question aimed at getting the more targeted response).*

**OR**

*Let me ask you to stop for a moment because of some of what you’re talking about now I want to get later in the interview. First I need to find out from you...*

Interrupting can be awkward, but when done with respect and sensitivity, the interruption can actually help the interview. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to help the interviewee understand what kind of information is being requested. Continuing for a long period of time when the interview has gone off track can waste the time of both the interviewer and interviewee.

**8 Finish the interview:** thank the interviewee for their time and provide contact details if they need to follow up in the future regarding the interview. Also obtaining feedback from the participant regarding the interview can provide insight for you for furthering your skills.

## WRITING, ANALYSING AND REFLECTING ON THE INTERVIEW

- 1** **Manage data:** choose and follow a clear file naming system, develop a data tracking system, de-identify participants in the study and link participants to consent forms. Also keep copies of important information and ensure it is backed up.
- 2** **Write up:** transcription of interviews provides a written document of what was shared and/or observed within the interview. Transcribing begins the process with becoming more familiar with the data, allow for reflection, as well as begin the analytical process (See INFORMATION SHEET- QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW-RECORDING AND TRANSCRIBING).
- 3** **Analysis:** the analysis is a process that reviews the data in order to develop reliable and valid themes for interpretation and reporting (see INFORMATION SHEET- QUALITATIVE EVALUATION METHOD: DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS)
- 4** **Reflect on the interview, with strategies such as:**
  - Listen or watch (if digital) the interview or have another person listen or watch the interview recording with you to identify where major improvements can be made.
  - Review the interview transcript for questions or words within questions that may have been confusing to the participant based on their responses.
  - Highlight where you have used open-ended questions and probes and the impact this had on responses.
  - Highlight where you have used closed ended questions, double barrelled or leading questions and note the impact that this has had on the responses.
  - Identify areas in the interview where you could have gained more depth in the responses and probing questions you could have used in these cases.
  - Watch both great and bad interviewers and interviews and note what skills and strategies were implemented or were missing. Examples of good interviewers are: Andrew Denton, Julia Zemiro. Examples of poor interviewing styles that demonstrate leading and closed ending questions include: Today-Tonight, 60 minutes.

### RECOMMENDED READING

- “The Art of Conversation” by Judy Apps 2014, John Wiley and Sons, Oxford, United Kingdom
- “Qualitative Interviewing” by Michael Patton 1990. In Qualitative Evaluation Research Methods. M Q. Patton Sage publications, Newbury Park, California