INTERVIEWS

Purpose

The purpose of conducting interviews is to collect information from a single person through a format that may range from structured, to semistructured, to unstructured.

Needs Assessment Applications

Individual interviews can often provide in-depth context, stories, and discussion related to one or more topics that are pertinent to the needs assessment. Such interviews can be done in an environment where the interviewer can ask for elaboration or explanation with follow-up questions. (For a helpful sample checklist and a sample protocol, see pages 110–115.)

Interviews also offer an opportunity for the interviewee to become familiar with the needs assessment and its objectives. Individuals in positions of influence may also appreciate the additional personal attention that the interview can offer as opposed to a survey or focus group.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- Interviews typically allow for more focused discussions and follow-up questions.

- Individuals may offer information in interviews that they wouldn't offer in a group context.

- Interviews can be an excellent source for stories and context.

- The interviewer can observe the nonverbal behavior of an interviewee.

Disadvantages

- Time requirements for interviewers and interviewees can be significant.

- Interviews have the potential to reduce the scope and sample for data collection.

- The results of multiple interviews may contradict each other or may be difficult to analyze.

- Interviewees may be biased or may represent only a limited perspective on performance issues and themes.

- Interviews, if not done well, can get off topic and frustrate both interviewer and interviewee (the interviewer can leave without the necessary information to guide his or her assessment; the interviewee can feel that the time was not productive).

Process Overview

1. Create a list of all the information required for completing your needs assessment. Prioritize and align the list of information requirements on the basis of your assessment's objectives and of the participants available for the interviews.

2. Determine what information is required from each interview.

3. Select interviewees who can best provide the information you are looking for in the interviews. Experts are often included as interviewees, but novices should also be considered when questions regarding current (or entry) knowledge and skills are elements in the assessment's considerations.

4. For each interview, create a protocol that will guide the questions that are to be asked.

    a. Determine how structured the protocol should be. A *structured interview protocol* has clearly defined questions and order of questions and can be repeated to elicit the same type of information across different interviewees. A structured interview is preferable when you want to aggregate or generalize information. This approach to interviewing is also preferable when your interviewees are not necessarily experts on a given topic or experienced interviewees (for example, interns seeking to gather information for a needs assessment plan with community

leaders). An *unstructured interview* may start with a set of loosely planned questions in the protocol, but the interviewer may alter the questions and the order of questions depending on the information provided by each interviewee. An unstructured interview works best for interviewees who are well-informed about the topic and are able to deviate from a set plan.

b. Determine the types of questions to be included in the protocol. A protocol may include a range of types of questions, including open-ended questions (*What are the possible causes for these identified gaps?*) and closed-ended questions (*Of the six gaps in the handout provided, identify the gap that is most important to address this year*).

c. Leave room in the protocol for the interviewer to take notes during the interview, and include possible follow-up questions to help guide the discussion (see the link in the Websites section of this document for some suggestions on creating an interview protocol).

d. Conduct needs assessment interviews with a formal and systematic process that can be replicated.

e. Ensure that required information regarding both the current results and the desired results of the needs assessment are represented in the protocol, along with the required information at each level of the program or project results chain.

5. Schedule a convenient time and location for the interview. The interview should take place in a friendly location where both the interviewee and interviewer will feel comfortable discussing potentially delicate topics. Describe to the interviewee how the information will be used and the confidentiality of the information provided.

6. Take careful notes during the interview, offering to recap the response of the interviewee whenever there may be confusion. Follow the interview protocol carefully to ensure that you don't have to schedule a second interview to ask questions that may have been skipped. When possible, it is often a good idea to record an interview so you can verify your notes after the interview is complete. Another option is to have a note taker accompany the interviewer.

7. Immediately following the interview review your notes carefully to ensure that you have accurately captured all of the relevant information. If you find any confusion, this is the time to call or e-mail the interviewee to verify information or to ask for clarifications.

A Guide to Assessing Needs

8. Relate the findings from each interview to other data sources for verification. For instance, if an interviewee quotes a news article or a research report, then it is typically useful to check that resource to ensure that the facts and figures provided by the interviewee were accurate and presented without bias.

Tips for Success

- Create a friendly and open environment by using active listening techniques (such as recapping, paraphrasing, taking notes, and using friendly body language).

- Refrain from asking leading questions (*"I'm sure you agree that . . ."*) or cutting off an interviewee during his or her response. If you are to avoid cutting off interviewees, it is often helpful to include potential follow-up questions as part of the interview protocol.

- Interviewers should not debate or argue with the interviewees. Interviewers are supposed to gather the views of others, not convince the interviewees of the interviewers' views.

- Using the critical incident technique can be a valuable way to differentiate between perceptions and past experiences. Interviewees are asked to provide past events as examples when they respond to specific questions. Each event should include a description of the conditions or context for the event, the people involved in the event, the place of the event, and the associated activities or behaviors of people in the event.

- Take good notes during the interview (or record it, if the participant is agreeable).

References and Resources

Altschuld, James W. 2010. *Needs Assessment Phase III: Collecting Data* (Book 3 of *Needs Assessment Kit*). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Altschuld, James W., and J. N. Eastmond Jr. 2010. *Needs Assessment Phase II: Getting Started* (Book 2 of *Needs Assessment Kit*). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

McClelland, Samuel B. 1994a. "Training Needs Assessment Data-Gathering Methods: Part 2—Individual Interviews." *Journal of European Industrial Training* 18 (2): 27–31.

Witkin, Belle Ruth, and James W. Altschuld. 1995. *Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Websites

"Getting the Lay of the Land on Health: A Guide for Using Interviews to Gather Information" is available at http://www.accessproject.org/adobe/getting_the_lay_of_the_land_on_health.pdf.

"Information Brief: Developing Interview Protocols" is available at http://www.neirtec.org/evaluation/PDFs/PreparingtoCollect5.pdf.

A sample interview protocol is available at http://www.ceismc.gatech.edu/MM_Tools/NIP.html.

A tip sheet on asking open-ended and probing questions is available at http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf_files/Asking1.PDF.

A tip sheet on conducting key informant interviews is available at http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf_files/Conducting1.PDF.

Tips for using individual interviews as a surveying technique are available at http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf_files/Tips.PDF.

The USAID article on conducting needs assessment interviews is available at http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNABS541.pdf.

Samples of Interview Preparation Checklist and Interview Release Agreement

Interview Preparation Checklist

☐ On what basis was this interviewee selected?

☐ Do I have the time and location of the interview?

☐ What do I know about the interviewee (title, experiences, background, and so on) ?

☐ Has the interviewee been sent information on the topic and focus of the interview?

☐ Should the interview questions be sent to the interviewee before the interview?

☐ Will the interview use closed-ended questions, open-ended questions, or a combination of both?

☐ Do I have some sample follow-up questions identified for each inter-view question?

☐ What information must I get from the interview?

☐ What information would it be nice to get, but is not necessary, from the interview?

☐ Are there documents I should ask for at the end of the interview (reports, files, and so on)?

☐ How will I take notes during the interview?

☐ Will I record the interview? If so, have I checked the batteries in the recorder? Have I asked the interviewee for permission to record the interview? (See the generic interview release agreement that follows.)

☐ How will I transcribe the interview recording (or notes)? Will I have time immediately after the interview to reflect on the answers and to take additional notes?

Interview Release Agreement

Sample Interview Permission or Release Form

(Organization)
(Address)

_____("Interviewer") has informed me that he or she is gathering research for a needs assessment and related Assessments on the subject of _____ (collectively "the Assessment") and has asked me to grant interviews and to otherwise cooperate with the Interviewer in connection with the Assessment.

To assist the Interviewer in preparing the Assessment, I have agreed to be interviewed and to provide information and other materials to be used in connection with the Assessment, including personal experiences, remarks, and recollections, as well as any other documents that I may choose to give to the Interviewer ("the Interview Materials").

I hereby grant and assign to the Interviewer and his or her licensees, successors, and assigns the following rights in connection with the Interview Materials for use as part of the Assessment in any and all reports, versions, and media in perpetuity throughout the world. Indicate your agreement with any of these statements below by checking the boxes and initialing your name next to each agreed item.

☐ The right to **quote or paraphrase using my name** all or any portion of the Interview Materials and to generally use and publish the Interview Materials, including my experiences, recollections, incidents, remarks, and information, as well as any other documents that I may give to the Interviewer.

-- OR --

☐ The right to **anonymously quote or paraphrase** all or any portion of the Interview Materials and to generally use and publish the Interview Materials, including my experiences, recollections, incidents, remarks, and information, as well as any other documents that I may give to the Interviewer in manner where my identity is protected.

☐ The right to use my name, image, voice, likeness, and biographical data.

☐ The right to develop, produce, and distribute the Assessment in any manner that the Interviewer deems appropriate. I understand and acknowledge that the Interviewer's company (which may be the same as mine) will be the sole owner of all copyright and other rights pertaining to the Assessment.

To enable the Interviewer to develop the Assessment in any manner deemed best, I hereby release and discharge the Interviewer and his or her licensees, successors, and assigns from any and all claims, demands, or causes of action that I may have against them by reason of anything contained in the Assessment, or any of the above uses, including any claims based on the right of privacy, the right of publicity, copyright, libel, slander, or any other right.

I acknowledge and agree that I am not entitled to receive any form of payment from the Interviewer or from his or her licensees, successors, and assigns.

Agreed and confirmed:

_____   _____
Printed Name   Date

_____   _____
Signature   Date

Sample of Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol to Identify Teachers' Capacity Gaps in Classroom Teaching Skills and Behaviors

Instructions: Use this protocol to interview principals from provincial schools. The purpose is to obtain information about capacity gaps that teachers have in the area of classroom teaching skills and behaviors.

Introduction	
Welcome (Where appropriate, modify the script and questions.)	**Script:** Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. You are one principal in our sample of 58 principals who are from across the country and were selected to provide information on the topic discussed today. In this interview, we will focus on identifying the challenges and capacity gaps that exist among your teachers in the area of classroom teaching skills and behaviors. This interview is part of a broader needs assessment sponsored by the national ministry of education. The overall needs assessment is being conducted so people can understand capacity development issues in the education system—not just related to teachers' skills and behaviors—and then can make decisions on how to address the issues. The information that you provide will not be attributed directly to you.
Do you have any questions regarding our goals?	Notes:
Questions	
Q1. How many years have you served as a principal?	
Q2. How many years have you served as a principal in this school?	

Q3. What is your highest level of education?	☐ High school or secondary education or lower
	☐ Basic university level (for example, associate's degree, Tecnicatura, and so on)
	☐ Intermediate university level (for example, bachelor's degree, Licence, Licenciatura, and so on)
	☐ Master's degree level or equivalent (for example, Master of Business Administration, Maîtrise, Maestria, and so on)
	☐ Postmaster's level or equivalent (for example, All But Dissertation and so on)
	☐ Doctorate level or higher
	☐ Other: Please specify and describe it with regard to the earlier list
Q4. As a school principal, describe your work.	
Q5. How many teachers do you supervise?	
Q6. How many students were enrolled in the school at the beginning of the year (indicate start date of school year)?	
Q7. How many students are currently enrolled in the school now (indicate date)?	

Q8: Drawing on your experiences, can you describe the two or three major capacity gaps related to your teachers' classroom teaching skills and behaviors that limit your school and your province in achieving their educational goals?	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
Q9: What do you believe are the causes of each of the capacity gaps that you identified in the previous question?	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
Q10: Are there other challenges that you believe limit the capacity of your province to achieve its educational goals?	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
Q11: Can you recommend anyone I should meet with to identify related capacity gaps?	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
Conclusions	
Review	**Script:** Summarize the major capacity gaps identified from the conversation, and then ask the interviewee to verify that you accurately interpreted the responses.