

# Conducting Interviews

Each participant in the interview—interviewer and interviewee—has a role to perform and a set of behaviors that assist in the performance. Because the role and behaviors of each one influence the conduct of the interview, they affect the other participant. The interviewer's role and behaviors can be prescribed and acquired through training, while the interviewee's role and behaviors must be observed by the interviewer, who seeks to modify them as necessary to successfully complete the interview.



To oversimplify, the role of the interviewer is to ask the questions, while that of the interviewee is to respond with answers. Actually, the interviewer must perform at least eight major tasks:

- Develop rapport with the interviewee and show interest
- Give the interviewee a reason to participate
- Elicit responsiveness from the interviewee
- Ask questions in a prescribed order and manner
- Ensure understanding
- Ensure non-bias
- Obtain sufficient answers
- Show sensitivity to the interviewee's burden

These tasks, which are not isolated but must be integrated into the interview procedure, are discussed below from the viewpoint of the interviewer and his or her responsibilities.

## Developing rapport and showing interest



Seek to establish a balanced relationship between the interviewee and yourself as an empathetic, friendly individual who is not too different from the interviewee but who is also an independent, unbiased, and honest collector of data. Your appearance, verbal mannerisms, body language, and voice will determine the rapport, starting with the contact that sets up the interview.

Make your verbal and voice cues calm and unflustered. Speak so the interviewee need not strain to hear and understand. Changes in voice inflection, sighs, or other noises give clues to your feelings or moods, as do your facial expressions and body language. Control these so that the interviewee does not pick up impatience, disapproval, or other negative feelings. Ideally, you should not experience such feelings during the interview, since you are supposed to be an

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impartial, unbiased, and tolerant observer. Likewise, you should control expressions of positive feelings or agreement with what the interviewee is saying.

It is important that the interviewer be aware of characteristic nonlinguistic cues such as change in voice, facial expressions, or gestures, since as much as half of the communication that takes place during the interview is conveyed by these modes of expression. Failure to understand these cues may result in miscommunication.

Your appearance is still another variable that influences rapport and, therefore, the tone of the interview. Dress to fit both the interview and the interviewee. Not doing so might get the interview off to a bad start.

### **Giving the interviewee a reason to participate**

Interviewees who are not aware of the importance of the evaluation and how they can help may not give sincere and well-thought-out answers. Your explanations to them, therefore, are important to the validity of the resulting data.

### **Helping the interviewee to be responsive**



Many people you may contact have never before been interviewed. They may have had job interviews. But generally they have not been asked for their opinions and feelings. Thus, the individual may need to learn how to act as an interviewee. The interviewer should help in this process, and while this should not include hints on how questions should be answered, it does involve making the interviewee comfortable and capable as a respondent.

During the interview, it may help to reinforce the interviewee with such verbal cues as

- “Uh-huh, I see.”
- “Let me get that down.”
- “I see” (repeat answer).
- “I want to make sure I have that right.”
- “It’s useful to get your ideas on this.”
- “Thanks, it’s important to get your opinion on that.”
- “I see, that’s helpful to know.”

### **Asking questions in a prescribed order and manner**

The order in which the questions appear in the structured interview is not accidental. Questions are ordered so as to lead the interviewee through various topics, correctly position sensitive questions, and hold the interviewee’s interest.

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- The following tips may help:
  - Ask the questions exactly as they are worded in the questionnaire
  - Ask the questions in the order in which they are presented in the questionnaire
  - Ask every question specified in the questionnaire
  - Read each question slowly (two words per second)
  - Repeat questions that are misunderstood or misinterpreted
  - Do not let the interviewee stray from the questions in the interview
  - Keep nonverbal cues as neutral as possible

### **Ensuring understanding**

At times, an interviewee will not understand a question, as indicated either by telling the interviewer so, by not answering, or by providing an answer that seems inconsistent or wrong. When this happens, you should use an appropriate probing technique such as the following:

- Repeat the question
- Give an expectant pause
- Repeat the interviewee's reply
- Make neutral questions or comments, such as "Anything else?" "Any other reason?" "Any others?" "How do you mean?" "Could you tell me more about your thinking on that?" "Would you tell me what you have in mind?" "What do you mean?" "Why do you feel that way?" "Which would be closer to the way you feel?"

To maintain the meaning of the questions, and not to bias them, do this "probing" with care. Rephrasing the question or adding new questions should be avoided. If all probes have been tried and rephrasing or adding questions is the only alternative, notes to that effect should be added next to the responses.

### **Ensuring non-bias**



There can be bias in the way you pose the contents of the query, in the introduction of your own ideas into a probe, or in your adding certain verbal emphasis or using certain body language. All these can destroy the neutrality that should characterize your presentation.

### **Obtaining sufficient answers**

You must learn to judge when an answer is sufficient before going to the next question. If the answer is incomplete or vague, you should ensure that the question is understood or draw more out of the interviewee to complete the answer.

### **Showing sensitivity to interviewee burden**

Before conducting an interview, give the interviewee a general statement of how long it is expected to take. You are then under some obligation to adhere to this time limitation.



Frequently, interviewees prolong their answers by adding examples, critical incidents, or other stories. If neither you nor the interviewee has a time problem, this extension of the interview is acceptable. If time is critical, however, use techniques to speed up the interview so as not to lose valuable answers at the end. Besides the length of time taken, the interview can be burdensome because of the amount of work the interviewee needs to go through to produce the information requested. If a relatively unimportant question requires a significant amount of time or energy by the interviewee, it may not be worth pursuing.

Source: From *Using Structured Interviewing Techniques*, United States General Accounting Office, June 1991

