



Interview

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Interview

Use

Asking questions verbally using different types of interviews is a frequently used method of data collection. In contrast to the questionnaire, the interview method is suitable for complex questions that require additional explanation. The problem of low response rates does not occur with interviews. The disadvantage with interviews is that they take a lot of time and require well qualified interviewers so that the interviewees can provide as much information as possible without restraint in the time available.

Planning and implementation

Deciding on a subject

The first step in planning a survey consists in clarifying the subject matter of the survey, that is determining the subjects and questions about which you want to collect data and whether a verbal interview is generally suitable for this purpose.

Selecting interviewees

As a second step, you should consider the people most suitable for providing information on the subject matter of the survey and/or what perspectives you want/have to obtain. You should check whether all the target groups have been adequately taken into account. The target groups to be interviewed and the ones not to be interviewed is to be explained as a basic rule.

Deciding on the type of interview

After the subject matter and the interviewees have been determined, the type of interview must be specified. The following aspects have to be clarified:

- Structuring degree (structured – half structured – unstructured)
- Type of contact (direct – telephone – via Internet)
- Setting (individual interview – group interview)
- Total number of interviewees
- Number of interviewers (an interviewer tandem)

Three basic distinctions can be made as regards the structuring degree:

- structured: exactly stipulates the sequence, content and number of questions
- half-structured: most frequent type of guided interviews with stipulations loosely made
- unstructured: no stipulations made about the wording and sequence of questions whatsoever



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As with questionnaires, the following distinctions are made between interviews:

- closed-ended questions: a set of possible answers is given
- open-ended questions: the response is free

When interviewing a large number of people, a structured interview with predominantly closed-ended questions is the method of choice (e.g. for computer-aided telephone interviews). The results from such interviews are hardly different to those from written questionnaires. However the interactive form of questioning leaves room for specific follow-up questions.

Half-structured interviews with open-ended and closed-ended questions allow for differentiated, individual and subjective opinions to be given but also provide a set of responses that are comparable and quantifiable.

If an interviewer wants to talk about a subject that he knows little about or if he wants the interviewee to talk with as little interruption as possible, an unstructured interview with questions that mainly encourage the interviewee to tell a story/give a report is an advantage (narrative interview).

Drafting interview guidelines

The interview needs guidelines, a (self-) instruction for interviewers. The guidelines structure the interview and conduct the interviewer through the discussion. Well designed guidelines lead the interviewer through the interviewing process and ensure and that questions are asked in such a way as to elicit the most specific answers possible. Interview guidelines are essential both if you delegate conducting the interview and if you conduct the interviews yourself. Where interviews are not transcribed word-for-word, the interview guidelines also state the structure of the written record.

Asking and instructing interviewees

Interviewees must be asked for their consent to an interview. It is very important for the interviewees to know exactly what the interview is about, and which subject will be discussed and how. Interviewees appreciate receiving guidelines in advance so that they can prepare themselves for the discussion.

Interviews are less anonymous than written questionnaires and the responses given face to face are even more influenced by motivational factors than written ones, i.e. respondents tend to give socially desirable answers. For this reason, interviewees must be told that there are no right or wrong answers, that the statements are anonymised during evaluation and that the interviewer is subject to secrecy.

Recording and preparations

If possible, interviews should be recorded. After promising anonymous treatment, most interviewees agree to the interview being recorded on tape (or if necessary also on video). In addition, the discussion can be written down in brief outlines, particularly if the conversation is conducted by two people. If it is not possible to record the interview, the written record should be read through and supplemented as soon as possible after the discussion so that the logic of the statements made by interviewees can still be understood later.



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There are various ways of preparing data depending on the evaluation method. Quantitative data gained from interviews are prepared in a descriptive, statistical manner analogously to the questionnaires. For qualitative evaluations, interviews are usually transcribed word-for-word. That is usually only worthwhile if it is possible to carry out a professional evaluation using a suitable method. As part of self-evaluations, it is recommended that a written record is made of the interview and important statements and that this is sent to the interviewee for verification. Once the interviewee has amended, accepted and returned the record, it can be evaluated.

Evaluation

Interviews can be evaluated on a quantitative or qualitative basis.

Quantitative evaluation

Quantitative evaluations are concerned with evaluating responses numerically. Statements made by interviewees are allocated to certain answer categories and later on, interpretation is based on the frequencies of these allocations. This method does not fully exploit the diversity and differentiation of the data material collected by open-ended questions (which are usually the case in interviews). Quantitative evaluations of interviews tend to be advisable for closed-ended questions and a large number of interviewees.

Qualitative evaluation

There are well-devised methodical procedures for evaluating transcribed interviews (global evaluation, content analyses, grounded theory, etc.). Such evaluations can only be conducted by qualified researchers and are more suitable for external evaluations. In self-evaluations, simple forms of analysing content are recommended: the interview records are examined for certain questions (largely the questions given in the guidelines), which means that the contents of the various records are combined and structured. The various perspectives of each question can thus be elucidated, compared and evaluated.

Interpretation

The interpretation of (quantitatively or qualitatively) collected data does not occur instinctively, but is based on theoretical knowledge and contextual knowledge of the examined field. Moreover, data taken from different sources are related to one another during interpretation. It is thus possible to make results from written surveys more subtle by combining them with results from interviews. In the report, as a basic rule, statements made by interviewees should be distinguishable from the interpretations made by the evaluators; reasons for interpretations must be given and conclusions must be clearly drawn from the information given in the report.