

Interviews

What does this technique do?

Interviews are conducted talking to an informant, either directly or on the telephone. Individual opinions and subjective preferences about products can be collected. The interview can be performed in a structured manner using a questionnaire which is filled in by the interviewer (see Questionnaires) or it can be more open ended using an interview guide that describes the areas the interview should cover. Since the interview is conducted on an one-to-one manner it should be possible to create an atmosphere that facilitates good responses, which clears up misunderstandings about the questions and ensures that the informant expresses what he/she really means. It can also be performed in the informants home or workplace. This makes interviews well suited as a data collection method in the AT area. People who also have problems in expressing their opinions in groups, should be interviewed instead (see Group Discussions)



SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Mental impairment ►

Communication disabilities |

► See Sources of Further Information

The interviewer should make the person being interviewed feel at ease!

When to use it

Interviews can be carried out at any stage of the design process as a means to gather information. They can be used to identify detailed user requirements and to get the user's experience with a particular product. In the user requirement stage, unstructured or semi-structured interviews should be used to allow the process to be user led. In later phases of design more structured forms, such as an administered questionnaire may be used. The interview is especially appropriate when questions are of a sensitive nature, or complex information is involved, as is often the case in the AT area. It is also suitable when it is suspected that the interviewees might be low on motivation to participate or give information.

Interviews are a more time consuming method to use than questionnaires, particularly if data are collected from a large number of informants. However if the number of informants are few (and especially if the informants have problems filling in a questionnaire) the interview is the most cost efficient method. If the information is recorded using a tape recorder, a considerable amount of time is used transcribing the tape. It is often more efficient to use two interviewers, and let one take notes throughout the interview whilst the other asks the questions.

Who can use it

In principle anyone can conduct an interview. However, there are some risks involved using this technique. Since it is a one-to-one situation, the interviewer has the possibility to influence the situation and there is subsequently a danger of biasing the answers towards the interviewer's own opinions. This may happen if the questions lead the interviewees towards particular answers, or if the interviewer comments upon the answers in a way that indicates their own values. It is therefore an advantage to train interviewers before an interview to minimise the risk of biasing the questions and ensure that valid data is gathered.

Who are the informants

Interviews can be conducted with a wide range of disabled users. Normally an interview will involve a single interviewer and a single interviewee, who is normally the end user. However on many occasions, it may also be appropriate to involve helpers or experts, in order to identify particular problems which the users might have. See the section "who are the informants" under Group Discussions.

Special considerations

Due to the one-to-one situation many of the considerations mentioned for other techniques are irrelevant for the use of interviewing techniques. The one-to-one situation makes it possible to get information from people with a wide range of disabilities. Success depends on the interviewer's ability to establish a rapport with the informant. A good rapport means that a situation is established where the informant provides clear responses and a relationship of trust and communication exists. This requires the interviewer to be responsive to the interviewee, as well as following normal rules of polite conversation. People selected for market survey work are often picked because of their neutrality – neither being too extrovert or introverted, attractive or ugly. The idea is to represent a reasonably neutral image that a minimum of people will be intimidated or threatened by. Simple things like dress can influence initial reaction, and should be thought about. As long as this is established, even people with severe mental or physical disabilities can be interviewed. However this implies that the results rely on the interviewer's skills and personal abilities. He or she needs to know about the informants situation and disabilities and to be knowledgeable about the topic of interest to the investigation. Thus it should be stressed that there normally is a need to train the interviewers. In some cases it may be a good idea to let helpers with appropriate training perform interviews.

Since an interview often is conducted in a persons home some considerations about privacy should be noted. It is important to let the informant know who you are and how he/she was chosen for an interview. The informant should grant permission to use a tape/video recorder, and the confidentiality of information captured should be assured. It is important not to overwhelm the informant with technology, and intimidate them (see picture). The interviewer should try to make the interviewee feel at ease, but there should also be some degree of formality in the proceedings. A cup of tea or coffee can be a good way of relaxing an interviewee, but such activities should not be allowed to interfere too much with the data capture. However the interviewer should be prepared to spend some time in gaining the confidence of those they are interviewing, and this may be particularly the case when dealing with elderly people and those with cognitive impairment.

Mental impairment

The interview technique is well suited for getting information from people with mental impairments. It should be noted however, that questions should be specific and stated in a simple manner. Care should be taken so that the informant does not feel they are being asked questions which are too difficult to answer. It is a good idea to use examples and to ask for comparisons between them. This means that if

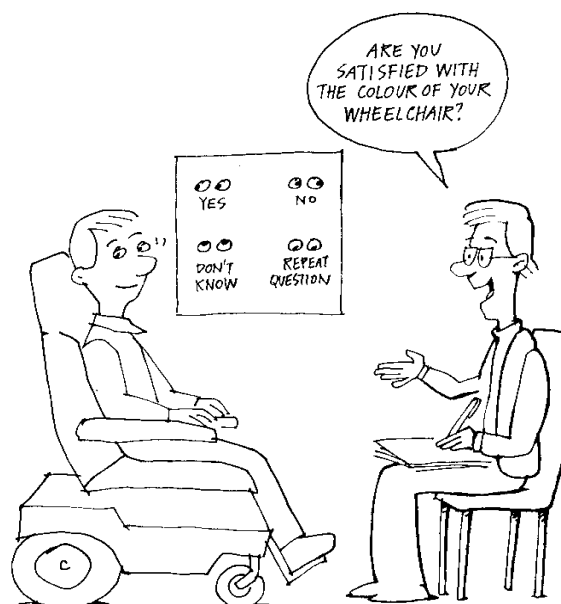
mentally impaired people are to be interviewed a special interview guide should be constructed for them. It might be a good idea to involve someone the informant knows and trusts in some situations, to ensure that the informant will not feel insecure or anxious about the interview..

Communication disabilities

Communication disabilities can manifest themselves in many ways, and have many causes, e.g. no speech, paralysis, brain damage, hearing problems, visual impairments etc. Since the interview demands the ability to communicate an answer, it is important to establish a means to collect answers when normal sources of communication are impaired. If a person is blind there will normally be no specific problem to obtaining answers, but in dealing with the deaf a sign interpreter might be needed.

The important issue is to know the target group of the interview and to take measures to compensate for their special problems. In some cases this might be extremely difficult, but it should not be regarded as impossible. As long as the informant can move a limb or can make sounds it is possible to establish a situation where communication is possible (see picture nn for an example). It might mean that all the answers need to be “yes” or “no”. This of course demands thorough preparation of the interview guide, and proper training of the interviewer. In some situations, the informant will need a considerable amount of time to establish a rapport with the interviewer, and to answer the questions. It should be stressed that this situation will be very demanding both on the interviewer and the informant. The interview should therefore not last too long. If it lasts longer than one hour it is recommended that the interviewer divides the interview into several parts and takes long breaks between them. It may also be necessary to have several interviews over a period of time, each one building on the previous, in an iterative fashion.

Even eye movements can be used
to answer questions!



Procedure

Even though interviews can be conducted in an unstructured and open manner it is advisable to plan the interview in some detail. Even if the interviewer is extremely knowledgeable and skilled the quality of the interview depends on thorough preparation. This will normally imply producing a list of themes or questions, called an interview guide, which can assist the interviewer during the interview. In addition it is recommended that questions should be piloted with a small sample of respondents to ensure that all questions are unambiguous, and that all participants know what is expected from them. If it is not possible to pilot the interview with the target group, then at least some internal testing should take place. Ideally this should be done with people who understand the target group, but any contribution is likely to be better than none. Often a colleague can identify the most obvious problems with an interview schedule, which were not seen by its original author.

Preparations

If the interview is to be performed in a structured manner, the questions should be constructed and tested in the same way as a questionnaire (see section on questionnaires). If it is going to be performed in a less structured way, the themes that will be covered need to be written down, and the order of questions decided. However, with a less structured interview format you might find that it is sometimes difficult to follow a predetermined order of questions. The interviewee may digress into themes that were initially not planned and it requires judgement on the part of the interviewer as to the degree of direction that is needed at any moment. For structured interviews it is recommended that the list of questions is written out completely, and that the guide is tested out on a group of informants. This pilot test can at the same time serve as training for the interviewer.

Administration

It is important to create a good atmosphere in the interview setting before starting to ask the questions. The informant should not be allowed to feel threatened or embarrassed by the situation. The interviewer should therefore know something about the informant's situation including their disability, and be aware of the possible effects the questions might have on the informant. The interview should not take too long, a maximum of about 40 minutes is recommended as a rough estimate. Several interviews can be conducted with the same person to allow a complete picture to be obtained.

It is important that the interviewer introduces themselves, and explains who they are representing, how the informants name and address where

found, the purpose of the interview, and how the data will be used. The matter of confidentiality should also be addressed and in most cases assurances should be given that the individual will not be identifiable from any material produced.

The questions should be asked according to the interview guide. The interviewer can clarify and repeat if necessary. It is important that the informant's pace is followed so that they have time to understand the questions and consider their responses. It is important that the interviewer does not hurry the informant to answer quicker than what can be expected, or attempt to answer questions on behalf of the informant.

To record the responses a tape recorder can be used, or the interviewer can take notes. It should be noted however that the complete analysis of recorded material can take a considerable amount of time. As mentioned before it can be more efficient to use two people as interviewers, one person asking the questions and the other taking notes. This reduces the need to transcribe taped material. A tape recording can also be used as a back up source of information, only to be used if there is any doubt or confusion which needs to be resolved by listening to the tape.

After the interview it is recommended that the informant is allowed to comment upon the situation and the questions they have answered. If the informant feels unhappy it is important to spend extra time to allow them to express any concerns they may have and assure them that the information will be treated confidentially.

Results

When the interview is unstructured the systematic recording and analysis of data is difficult. However unstructured interviews are often a rich source of information and can often be used as individual case studies, rather than attempting to be representative of the whole population being studied. Where there is a desire to summarise the findings from a sample of respondents, a more structured approach is advisable. A structured approach makes it relatively easy to carry out a standard form of analysis, which in turn makes statistical analysis possible. Analysis can be carried out more or less in the same way as with questionnaires, with counts of response categories being made and summarised.

Sources of Further Information ◀ ◀ ◀ ◀ ◀ ◀ ◀ ◀ ◀ ◀

Lifchez and Winslow (1979) advocate the use of interviews in a variety of different settings at a variety of times to facilitate the process of gaining an understanding of the physical environment of the disabled individual. Their initial interviews were conducted at a place chosen by the interviewee, subsequent interviews being conducted in a number of situations designed to aid the interviewee in explaining the sorts of problems they experience with such environments. Following the initial series of interviews, key informants are interviewed in depth to obtain detailed profiles of these persons, these interviews also being carried out in environments of relevance to the disabled individuals themselves.

Ward (1989) describes the use of interviews carried out in the homes of non institutionalised individuals for the purposes of obtaining data to develop general human factors guidelines for designing consumer products for disabled people. The actual data collection procedure comprised of unstructured interviews together with a room by room walk through of the home by the analyst and the person in question, during which an interface checklist was administered. Additionally, the overall framework for this approach was to use a critical incidents technique whereby specific problems are described and used as examples for the discussion. The interview team utilised by Ward was multi-disciplinary, comprised of a psychologist, a designer and a human factors specialist.

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