Interviewing and the Interview Write-up

Just-in-Time Job Aids

Introduction

The interview is an important evidence-gathering tool. This job aid includes the necessary knowledge and skills needed to prepare for, conduct, and document a face-to-face interview.

Planning the Interview

Step 1: Complete pre-interview research

- Develop sufficient background.
- Identify purpose and objectives.
- Identify who should be interviewed.
- Identify other sources of information needed.

Step 2: Prepare key questions

- Determine what you want to know.
- Draft key questions.
- Have your supervisor review the questions you drafted.

Step 3: Prepare logistics

- Schedule the time, place, and location of the interview.
- Inform the person being interviewed about the purpose and objectives of the interview.
- Decide how many staff from GAO should attend. Try to have more than one interviewer attend.

Conducting the Interview

Step 4: Open the interview

- Be punctual and dress appropriately.
- Conduct small talk, if appropriate.
- Provide introductions, purpose of the interview, and background on the engagement.
- Explain desired outcomes.

Step 5: Conduct the interview

- Ask the questions that your engagement team prepared.
- Practice active listening.
- Ask probing questions.
  - Don’t just accept the officials’ statements at face value—ask for supporting documentation.
  - Ask what the problems are, why they exist and how the officials would change the program; ask who, what, where, when, how, and why.

- Clarify ambiguous responses.
- Ask the officials to spell out any acronyms with which the engagement team is not familiar.
- Ask for definitions of key terms and technical jargon.
- Ask for reasons and examples to support the information provided.
    - Take detailed notes of the responses to your questions.
    - Maintain a list of documents to be obtained.
    - Maintain control of the interview.
- Focus the interview on relevant information.
- Watch for topics that the officials try to evade.
    - Respect time limits.
    - Ask for related documentation and referrals.

Step 6: Close the interview

- Summarize key information obtained.
- Explain how this information will be used.
- Address the officials' questions or comments.
- Ask the officials if it would be appropriate to contact them with any follow-up questions.
- Thank the officials for their time and information.

Debriefing and Documenting the Interview

Step 7: Debrief the interview

- Did you accomplish what you set out to do? If not, why not?
- What could you have done differently?
- Where does your engagement team need to go from here?
- Did everyone hear the same information?

Step 8: Complete post-interview activities

- Write up the interview as soon as possible after the meeting (see additional guidance below).
- Send the draft interview write-up to your supervisor for review.
- Obtain identified documentation from the officials that you interviewed.
- Schedule follow-up interviews as needed.

The Interview Write-up

The purpose of the interview write-up is to (1) document the facts of what was said in the interview and by whom and (2) organize these facts to help the engagement team develop findings. The format for the write-up can be found in the Record of Interview template in Word.

1. Write up the interview as soon as possible after the meeting to document the testimonial evidence obtained as completely and accurately as possible.
    - Use the notes from your engagement team members who also attended the meeting to record the meeting as accurately as possible.

- Generally, write-ups should be organized logically by topic, preferably with the most important material being presented first. Keep in mind that, while the write-up should be as detailed as possible, it is not a transcript of the interview.
- Cross-reference all documents referred to in the write-up by including the documents' index numbers or DM file numbers.
- Resolve all open remarks or unanswered questions.
    i. Use auditor or analyst notes to help explain context, circumstances, prejudice, or other contributing factors to the interviewees' statements.
    ii. Define all acronyms and abbreviations when they are first discussed.

2. Keep the objectives of your engagement in mind as you prepare the write up.
    - Identify the researchable questions you are answering.
    - Assess whether or not you are gathering the data you need to address the researchable questions for your engagement.
    - Use headings/sub-headings to organize the information whenever possible.
    - If necessary, ask your supervisor if you should confirm any of the information you gathered during the interview.

3. Ask your supervisor if other engagement team members who attended the interview should review your write-up for accuracy.

4. Provide your draft write-up to your supervisor for review.

Additional Guidance

Interviewing is both a data-gathering tool and a data-analysis tool. When you conduct an interview, you are gathering evidence to support potential findings**. Keep the researchable questions for your engagement in mind. They will determine for you the evidence you need to answer the question.** Failure to gather the appropriate evidence becomes apparent later on in an engagement when the team is ready to reach agreement on a message and management concludes that the team has not gathered the appropriate data to support our proposed message.

<u>Before the Interview</u>

Consider a sequencing strategy for your questions. Although GAO does not recommend a particular sequencing structure for conducting interviews, it may be helpful to anticipate how you will use the information you gather during the interview. The answer to this question may lead you to decide how the interview should be structured. The following are examples you might wish to consider.

> <u>Funnel Sequence</u>. Begin with the most general questions and then narrow the focus and become more specific with each succeeding question. This method provides more specificity and clarity to general answers that are initially provided. This method may cause the person being interviewed to revise initial statements to provide accuracy.
>
> <u>Inverted Funnel Sequence</u>. Begin with the specific questions and conclude with the most general questions. This method can help the interviewer develop relationships

between the specific issues being discussed and other issues that may be germane to the study.

Sensitivity Sequence. Consider placing the most difficult or threatening questions at the end of the interview. This method will help the interviewer maintain an open flow of communication for as long as possible. An alternative is to acknowledge at the beginning of the interview with the agency official that you have a sensitive issue to discuss and decide together whether to begin or end the interview with the sensitive issue.

Chronological Sequence. Start with the beginning of a process or timeline and follow it through in the order of events. This method is particularly helpful during interviews at the beginning of an assignment when the interviewer is obtaining background information.

Random Sequence. No particular order may be needed if all of the questions have equal importance.

During the Interview

Practice active listening.

- Suppress disruptive behavior (finger drumming, pencil tapping, fidgeting).
- Do not gaze out the window or read diplomas or certificates on the wall.
- Do not begin reading documents you are given while the official is speaking.
- Do not let your biases or knowledge obtained elsewhere interfere with the agency official's message. Keep an open mind.
- Do not jump to conclusions; hear the agency official out. As much as we may be tempted to develop a finding, do not put words into the official's mouth.
- Do not interrupt or debate.
- Do not assume what the agency official meant. Request clarification. Do not monopolize the conversation or try to have the last word.
- Be prepared to adjust your planned set of questions if necessary. However, do not jump ahead. Concentrate on what the official is saying at the moment.
- On key points, summarize or repeat back in your own words what you believe the official has just said. Afford the official the opportunity to make corrections.
- Show the person being interviewed that you are listening.
- Motivate the respondent to communicate more fully.

· Try to avoid common pitfalls.

- The interviewer uses lots of words, but **never gets to the point**. The agency official never really hears a question and, therefore, cannot really provide an effective answer.
- The interviewer asks **multiple questions in one**. The agency official is not sure which one to answer. In other cases, the agency official answers one part of the question, but the other parts are lost.
- The interviewer asks a **"yes/no" question** when an open-ended question may be more appropriate.
- The interviewer asks **leading questions** by identifying the expected answer in the question or by using emotionally loaded words.