Interview Methods and Tips

An Additional Help for ADS Chapter 527

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General Information

USAID uses structured or semi-structured interview methods for Organizational Effectiveness Reviews (OERs) when conducting a key informant or focus group interview.

Interviews are a good way to supplement initial desk research and analysis of the Operating Unit (OU) under review's documentation. The OER Team should define the selection criteria for identifying key informants based on their specialized knowledge and unique perspectives while ensuring a representative cross-section of informants. If an OER Team plans to use interviews to collect data, the OER Team must extract and document reliable information from them. Interviews can provide:

- Descriptive information;
- Anecdotal information;
- Information to supplement secondary source data and quantitative data; and
- Perspectives, opinions, suggestions, and recommendations on specific issues or new initiatives.

However, it is important to note that:

- Interviews are not substitutes for evidence-based review, analysis, and synthesis of data contained in an OU's documents (for example, policies, Mission orders, or Bureau/Independent Office (B/IO) standard operating procedures, performance reports, transaction files, and audits).
- Interviews have limitations. These can include an inability to generate precise quantitative data and a susceptibility to bias.
- While useful, conversations and informal meetings are not interviews. Findings and recommendations gleaned from these have low credibility.

The OER Team should consult ADS 527mac for guidance on establishing confidentiality and managing non-attribution with all OER participants. By guaranteeing non-attribution to all participants, the OER Team can encourage candid exchanges and prevent retribution against contributing OU staff and implementing partners who provide information to OER Teams. The OER Team should present any key information collected for non-attribution in general terms.

The OER Team can conduct the types of interviews below, in-person or virtually.[1] For OER Teams traveling to the OU under review, the OER Team can conduct initial, virtual focus groups prior to departing for in-office work. This approach increases the efficiency of the data collection process and acts as a cost-saving measure. Once the OER Team is in-office, they should collect data using in-person interviews, but may also continue to leverage virtual technology. OER Teams that are undertaking remote assessments should rely primarily on these virtual platforms throughout their data collection.

Types of Interviews

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews have more rigid operations through a standardized list of questions that are decided in advance of the interview. They allow the interviewer to more easily organize data and focus on the accuracy of responses. Questions in a structured interview can be close-ended or open-ended, but are standard across multiple interviews.

Strengths:

- An interviewer is highly prepared for the interview with a clear script to follow;
- The standardization of questions allows for a replicable interview process; and
- Answers are easily compared and analyzed.

Weaknesses:

- There is a limited scope and detail of obtained information; and
- Interviewers are expected to adhere to the list of questions even if additional or related information is brought up in the discussion.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are characterized by open-ended questions that allow for the interviewer and participant to follow a new, emerging thought. The interviewer prepares by drafting key questions or a discussion guide ahead-of-time, yet the participant still has the freedom to express their own experiences. This style can encourage more narration from participants than the structured interview format.

Strengths:

- The interviewer feels prepared ahead of the interview because of the discussion guide;

[1] Google Meet and WebEx are the Agency's preferred platforms for virtual meetings at the time of this policy writing. OER Teams should select the meeting platform(s) that the Agency provides at the time of their assessment.

- A semi-structured interview is flexible while maintaining research guidelines; and
- Reliable qualitative data is collected.

Weaknesses:

- The flexibility may make it difficult for the OER Team to compare different answers during post-interview analysis; and
- It could be difficult for a new interviewer to know when to bring the interview back to the key questions.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

KIIs are one-on-one (or two-on-one to allow for a note taker) qualitative, in-depth interviews with individuals selected for their first-hand knowledge about the topic of interest. They should include staff from multiple levels, including Cooperating Country Nationals Personal Services Contractor (CCNPSCs), with knowledge of the issues. When conducting this type of semi-structured interview, the interviewer should rely on a guide with key discussion questions. Interviewers ask follow-up questions spontaneously, probe for information, and take notes. These sessions usually last about one hour.

Strengths:

- Provide insights on motivations and attitudes that direct people's behavior;
- Elicit suggestions and ideas;
- Collect descriptive information;
- Build consensus on challenges, opportunities, and proposed actions or solutions; and
- Help interpret quantitative data.

Weaknesses:

- When poorly organized, KIIs take large amounts of time out of an already compressed OER schedule;
- Generally do not provide quantifiable information; and
- Interviews may be susceptible to interviewee or interviewer bias.

Focus Group Interviews

These interviews are best for getting a small group of participants internal to USAID (usually 7 to 12) to discuss their experiences, perspectives, and preferences about topics with the guided support of a facilitator. The facilitator raises issues identified in a discussion guide and uses probing techniques to solicit views, ideas, and other information. The facilitator should be aware of and sensitive to cultural norms, differences, and sensitivities that may affect the participation within the focus group. Groups should typically not include supervisors and their employees as participants in the same focus group. In certain cultures, people may participate more if the groups are separated by gender. Typically, these sessions will last one to two hours.

Strengths:

- Provide qualitative information on issues of program, management, services, operations, and other topics and problems;

- Identify attitudes, preferences, or needs related to new situations, policies, and initiatives; and

- Gather information rapidly from a larger target group.

Weaknesses:

- A few participants can dominate or sidetrack the discussion; and

- Managing the discussion and recording salient points requires more than one interviewer.

Additional types of focus groups include a "Two-Way Focus Group" and a "Dual-Moderator Focus Group." A two-way focus group consists of two focus groups running simultaneously with multiple moderators. The first cohort explores a given topic while a second, more technical, cohort observes the first group and comments on the first cohort's responses. This type of focus group allows the more technical cohort to observe and voice their opinions, without redirecting the first cohort's focus with discussions of technical problems. A dual-moderator focus group allows for each moderator to leverage opposing opinions in order to facilitate conversation. This approach ensures that participants engage with a range of ideas and challenge different ways of thinking. The two-way focus group model can also be adapted for different audiences and needs.

Interview Questions

Questions in a structured interview can be closed or open-ended. In a semi-structured interview, questions should be open-ended so respondents can use their own words to answer and speak to their experiences. In either type of interview, questions should be clearly worded and as neutral as possible. Prior to the interview, the OER Team should prepare a short interview guide with questions (ideally no more than 12) on major topics and issues related to the Scope of Work. OER Teams should test the guide by reviewing it with a focus on the sequence and wording of questions' clarity and promotion of conversational flow.

Interview questions can be grouped into themes, for instance:

1) What was intended?;

2) What actually occurred?;

3) What went well, and why?; and

4) What could be improved, and how?

The last two questions enable respondents to provide additional information.

Interview or Focus Group Management

When possible, two OER Team members should conduct interviews to ensure quality documentation of feedback. One member can facilitate the conversation while the other documents participant responses. To ensure that all participants are engaged during an interview or focus group, the facilitator can encourage those that have minimally contributed to offer feedback and redirect the focus from active participants to promoting the participation of other prospective contributors. Additionally, the facilitator can ask participants to keep their remarks focused and concise, as well as allow multiple participants to respond to questions. Throughout the interview, the facilitator should restate any salient feedback with the informants.

If the interview or focus group is conducted virtually, best practices for facilitators include:

- Communicate with the OER POC to determine if any accommodations are needed to promote the engagement of participants with disabilities or technological limitations;

- Allow participants to introduce themselves at the beginning to create a sense of shared space and understanding in a virtual environment;

- Post questions in the chat, especially after asking verbally, when transitioning between questions;

- Split time between facilitating a verbal conversation and acknowledging comments or questions shared in the chat;

- Establish and communicate an order for engaging participants that are in the virtual meeting as well as those that may have only called into the meeting; and

- Rely on the notetaker rather than record the conversation in order to preserve confidentiality.

Incorporating Technology into Interview Process

The OER Team should utilize digital tools in the OER process to maximize productivity and reduce the amount of time needed in-office to answer OER research questions.

Additionally, this help document contains functional checklists used in similar assessments conducted by peers in M/CFO, M/MS, M/OAA, and M/CIO. These materials are useful in organizing the OER data collection activities and generating research questions.

Also, M/CIO recommends the OER Team consider the impact of an OU maximizing access to the following information technology tools when creating sound recommendations:

1) Google Suite Applications (Mail, Calendar, Meet, Drive, Docs, etc.)

2) The Global Acquisition and Assistance System (GLAAS)

3) Phoenix

4) The Enterprise Reporting Portal (ERP)

5) Service Central

6) The USAID Approved Product Catalog[2]

For additional digital tools or questions about how these tools can better serve OUs, OER Teams should reach out to M/CIO.

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[2] The USAID Approved Product Catalog contains additional digital tools that the OER Team can use to conduct business analyses. For example, an activity tracker or time management analytical tool can assess Mission staff time on projects when implementing a new CDCS.