Cognitive Interview Guide Developed by the Performance Measurement Initiative

Introduction

The success of a study in measuring the impact an organization has on their target audience largely depends on the quality of data collected during interviews. To develop a robust and context-specific survey, we will conduct a pretest. This guide provides an overview of cognitive interviewing techniques that will be used during the pretest.

Cognitive Interviews and Data Collection

Purpose of the pretest: The purpose of a cognitive interview is to:

- Understand whether each question gathers the intended information from the respondent
- Evaluate that respondents understand each question in a consistent manner
- Dig deep into each question to understand how the respondent reacts, interprets and answers a question. The interviewer also seeks to understand how the respondent has come to his/her answer to a particular question

Length of a pretest interview: Each interviewer will interview a respondent for up to 90 minutes. As each question requires more than just asking the question and recording the answer, interviewers may only ask respondents to answer questions within certain sections (as opposed to asking all questions in the survey) to limit the interview to 90 minutes.

General information on conducting effective interviews: It is important to understand the interview from the respondent's point of view. Every interviewee will be different and could potentially give different responses. The interviewer should <u>not</u> expect an answer or reasoning to be the same for each respondent. Furthermore, some questions may be considered sensitive to the participant. The interviewer should <u>not</u> assume that the respondent is comfortable with everything being asked and is ready to answer every question effectively.

Please find below behavioral guidelines to follow to conduct more effective interviews:

Behavior	Guideline
Respect Confidentiality	Inform the interviewee that their confidentiality will be maintained throughout the process. (Please read the Informed consent form).
Respect Participant's Time	Understand that the participant is answering their survey on their free time. Do not keep them past agreed upon time and understand if they must leave.
Tact	Do not force the participant into answering a question.
Friendly Disposition	Always maintain a friendly demeanor with participants.
Body Language	Maintain good eye contact and appear attentive at all times.

Pace of Interview	Do not rush the interview. Also, do not allow an answer to go on a tangent and deviate from the interview. Maintain a comfortable, appropriate pace.
Patience	It may take the participant a few moments to comprehend the question being asked and to formulate an appropriate response. Also, the question may have to be repeated. Be patient throughout the process. Never make the participant to feel rushed or uncomfortable.
Acceptance	Never be judgmental or critical of an answer that the participant provides.
Appreciation	Always thank the participant for their time and cooperation.

Below are some guidelines to follow while asking questions to develop a comfortable atmosphere:

Topic	Guideline
Right or Wrong Answers	Ensure that there are neither right nor wrong answers and the interview is not a test
Read All Options	All options for an answer must be read to the participant clearly except for "DON'T KNOW"
Reading Questions	Questions should be read: • As they were written on the survey • In a pleasant and professional voice Do not change: • Wording • Ordering of Questions
Making Assumptions	Never make assumptions about answers with questions, such "I know this doesn't apply to you, but…"

Probing in the cognitive interview methodology: For each survey question that is being asked

1. Request from the respondent how she came to this answer
2. Request from the respondent what the question means to her and if it can be worded differently such that it is easy for all other respondents to answer

Below are some questions and statements to use to come to a complete understanding of the question and answer (example probes to use in a pretest interview):

- "What made you say that?"
- "Why did you respond that way?"
- "What does that mean to you?" or "what does that word mean to you?"
- "Please tell me what I was asking in your own words."
- Restate their answer. For example: "So you *agree that each customer requires a unique approach?*"
- "What is going through your mind?"
- "Can you take me through the steps of how you came to that answer?"
- "What were you thinking when you first answered the question?"

This table lists possible responses that definitely need probing

If the Participant Replies…	Then…
"I don't know" (DK)	Repeat the question
"I still don't know"	Probe once more before recording "DK." For example, ask "Could you give me your best estimate?"
"I still don't know"	This may mean the participant: • Is taking time to think and wants to gain time • Does not want to answer because of personal reasons • Actually does not know and has no opinion
"Not Applicable" (NA)	• Ask her why it is not applicable • Write down NA if it is clear that the question is irrelevant

The table below provides techniques to use when probing further

Technique	Guideline
Repeat the Question	The participant may come up with an answer if she hears the question a second time
Make a Pause	This gives the participant time to collect his/her thoughts and expand on his/her answer
Repeat the Participant's Reply	This is often a very effective way to give the participant the opportunity to reflect on the answer she has given
Use Neutral Probes	Use questions such as, "Is there anything else you would like to add" or "Could you tell me more about…" However, never give the impression that the answer provided is incorrect or that you disprove of it.

Additionally, the interviewer may need to restate the question to further clarify when the participant:

- Is taking a long time to answer the question
- Asks about a specific part of the question to be repeated
- Asks for one, a few, or all of the options to be repeated
- Asks for the clarification of a word or a phrase

In addition to probing to meet the goals of the pretest, the interviewer may find that she will need to probe further to get an appropriate response when the participant:

- Seems to understand the question but gives an inappropriate response
- Does not seem to understand what is asked
- Cannot make up his or her mind
- Digresses from the topic or gives irrelevant information
- Needs to expand on what is said to clarify the response
- Gives incomplete information or the answer is unclear

Additional details to keep in mind during a pretest

How to read the survey and conduct the interview

1. The informed consent form is also part of the pretest. Please note any questions that respondents may have on this form. Depending on the type of consent required, either have them sign the form or provide verbal consent and give them a copy for their records before proceeding with the rest of the survey.
2. During the introduction and informed consent form sections, interviewers should make eye contact with the respondent. The first exchanges should focus on rapport building and making the respondent feel comfortable
3. Time is recorded at several times during the interview. The goal of this is to understand how long the quantitative and qualitative sections of the survey take to completed. Interviewers should record the time accurately by filling in the blanks next to 'START TIME.' At the end of the survey, after thanking the respondent for their time, the interviewer should also fill in the 'END TIME'
4. In the survey, interviewers should not read out loud any text that is written in all CAPITAL (uppercase) font; these are meant as instructions for the interviewer. Interviewers should record any doubts that they have with any of the notes provided such that they can be adjusted accordingly. Additionally, interviewers should not read aloud 'DON'T KNOW' and 'NOT APPLICABLE' response options
5. Some questions require the use of showcards. For each survey interviewers conduct, they should carry printed copies of all showcards with them. Interviewers should read each 'INTERVIEWER NOTE' carefully and make sure the respondent is holding and reading the correct showcard for that particular question

How to conduct cognitive interviewing

1. Interviewers should take note of whether respondents understand the introductory text provided for each section of the survey, including the main introduction. The goal is to make sure that each section introduction is clear, includes all the appropriate information, and does not include any unnecessary information
2. Interviewers should look out for "confusion, contradictions, ambiguity and reluctance" in the respondent. When you notice any of these reactions, use the probing as well as think aloud methods described earlier in this guide
3. Throughout the entire survey, interviewers should write notes about any issues or questions that the respondent has (Note: interviewers should organize these comments/issues by question number); interviewers should also write down their suggestions for solutions to these issues/questions.
   Some specific issues interviewers should write notes about include, but are not limited, to:
   a. Whether respondents feel that certain questions or statements in the survey are repetitive
4. For questions where the respondent is given a time period over which she must respond to a question or statement (e.g., "how have you felt 'over the past one week'?"), the interviewer should make note of any reaction respondents have related to the time period provided.
5. For all questions with scales (e.g., from 1 strongly disagree' to 7 'strongly agree') interviewers should:
   a. Pretest the showcards, asking to see if wording and scales should be adapted to improve quality of respondent answers. The goal is to make sure that respondents understand what each number on the scale represents
   b. Note if the respondent really means their answer or if they are by default selecting the neutral response option (on a 7 point scale 4 is a neutral response) or the same response again and again. Interviewers should test if this is occurring by restating the entire statement with the interviewee's given response to see if they agree with the answer to match the original question (e.g., the interviewer could ask: "so you 'strongly agree' that you can always manage to solve difficult problems if you try hard enough?") During the pretest, the interviewer should also probe why they are selecting that number on the scale to ensure they really mean their answer versus selecting the number by default
   c. Record how respondents react to statements written in a negatively framed format (an example of a negative statement would be "I *don't* change my approach from one customer to another"). For negative statements, interviewers should repeat the respondent's answer back to them, except they should use the positive format to ensure that the respondent understands the question and is not

4

confused (for example: if a respondent says they 'strongly Agree' to the statement 'I don't change my approach from one customer to another," than the interviewer should ask "so you strongly disagree that you change your approach from one customer to another?").

6. Interviewers should ask if the contact information collected (with the purpose of contacting the respondent at a later time) is sufficient

7. Finally, based on their learnings from pretest interviews, interviewers should review and provide advice on the order of the survey sections. They should record respondent reactions to the order and progression of questions and sections. One objective of the survey is to ensure that respondents feel comfortable sharing sensitive information with the interviewer; this requires developing a rapport with the respondent during the interview and hence question and section order are important

Challenges during the interview

Interruptions: Interruptions may occur during an interview. If they become too long or too frequent, the interviewer should suggest continuing the interview at a better time. The interviewer should always remain polite and patient even when being interrupted.

Refusal to Answer: Some participants may refuse to be interviewed. Some may not refuse outright but may later express hesitancy, reservation, or hostility. Success in obtaining cooperation will depend upon the interviewer's manner and resourcefulness. Participants must not be forced to respond to the whole interview or any part of the survey if they choose not to do so.

Handling Refusals: The interviewer should be prepared to obtain cooperation from a participant who does not want to be interviewed. The interviewer should remain pleasant, good-natured, and professional. Here are some guidelines to help with handling refusal situations:

If…	Then…
The participant becomes defensive	- Show patience and understanding - Provide token agreement and understanding of his/her viewpoint, that is, saying something like, "I can understand that" or "You certainly have the right to feel that way" - Convey the importance of the survey to the participant
The interviewer may have visited at a bad time	Try again later
The participant may have misunderstood the purpose of the visit	Try to explain the purpose again
The interviewer thinks she may get a "no to the interview"	Try to leave and suggest coming back later before getting a partial or definite "no"

Language Issues: The interviewer should be aware that if interviewees use "interpreters of convenience" (such as members of the participant's family or household, village, or place of work), they might get incorrect information. If the interviewer does not get sufficient co-operation due to a language barrier, she should report this to their supervisor.

References

1. "How to guide" on Cognitive Interviewing by Gordon Willis
2. *"Evaluating Survey Questions" by Chance H Harrison, PhD Harvard*