INTERVIEWING

One method of collecting data is to interview respondents to obtain information on the issues of interest. Interviews could be unstructured or structured, and conducted either face to face or by telephone or on-line.

The unstructured and structured interviews are discussed first. Some important factors to be borne in mind while interviewing will then be detailed; thereafter, the advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face interviewing and telephone interviews will be enumerated, and finally, computer-assisted interviews described.

UNSTRUCTURED AND STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews are so labeled because the interviewer does not enter the interview setting with a planned sequence of questions that will be asked of the respondent. The objective of the unstructured interview is to cause some preliminary issues to surface so that the researcher can decide what variables need fur-
ther in-depth investigation. In Chapter 4, in the discussion of the "Broad Problem Area," we noted several situations where the manager might have a vague idea of certain changes taking place in the situation without knowing what exactly they are. Such situations call for unstructured interviews with the people concerned. In order to understand the situation in its totally, the researcher will interview employees at several levels. At the initial stages, only broad, open-ended questions would be asked, and the replies to them would give the researcher an indication of the individuals' perceptions. The type and nature of the questions asked of the individuals might vary according to the job level and type of work done by them. For instance, managers at top and middle levels might be asked more direct questions about their perceptions of the problems and the situation. Employees at lower levels may have to be approached differently.

Clerical and other employees at lower hierarchical levels may be asked broad, open-ended questions about their jobs and the work environment during the unstructured interviews. Supervisors may be asked broad questions relating to their department, their employees and the organization. The following request for instance, may be made during the unstructured interview stage:

"Tell me something about your unit and department, and perhaps even the organization as a whole, in terms of work, employees, and whatever else you think is important."

Such a request might elicit an elaborate response from some people, whereas others may just say that everything is fine. Following the leads from the more vocal persons is easy, especially when the interviewer listens carefully to the important messages that they might convey in a very casual manner while responding to a general, global question. As managers and researchers, we should train ourselves to develop these listening skills and identify the critical topics that are touched on. However, when some respondents give a one-word, crisp, reply that is not informative, the interviewer will have to ask questions that cannot be answered in one or two words. Such questions might be phrased as this:

"I would like to know something about your job. Please describe to me in detail the things you do on your job on a typical day, from eight in the morning to four in the afternoon."

Several questions might then be asked as a follow-up to the answer. Some examples of such follow-up questions include:

"Compared to other units in this organization, what are the strengths and weaknesses of your unit?"

"If you would like to have a problem solved in your unit, or eliminate a bottleneck, or attend to something that blocks your effectiveness, what would that be?"
If the respondent answers that everything is fine and she has no problems, the interviewer could say: "That is great! Tell me what contributes to this effectiveness of your unit, because most other organizations usually experience several difficulties." Such a questioning technique usually lowers the respondent's defenses and makes the individual more willing to share information. Typical of the revised responses to the original question is something like, "Well, it is not that we never have a problem, sometimes, we are late in getting the jobs done, crash jobs have some defective items..." Encouraging the respondent to talk about both the good things and the not-so-good things in the unit can elicit a lot of information. Whereas some respondents do not need much encouragement to speak, other do; and they have to be questioned broadly. Some respondents may be reluctant to be interviewed, and may subtly or overtly refuse to cooperate. The wishes of such people must be respected and the interviewer should pleasantly terminate such interviews.

Employees at the shop-floor level, and other nonmanagerial and nonsupervisory employees, might be asked very broad questions relating to their jobs, work environment, satisfactions and dissatisfactions at the workplace, and the like—for example:

*What do you like about working here?*
*If you were to tell me what aspects of your job you like and what you do not like, what would they be?*
*Tell me something about the reward systems in this place.*
*If you were offered a similar job elsewhere, how willing would you be to take it and why?*
*If I were to seek employment here and ask you to describe your unit to me as a newcomer, what would you say?*

After conducting a sufficient number of such unstructured interviews with employees at several levels and studying the data obtained, the researcher would have a grip on the variables that need greater focus and where more in-depth information has to be obtained.

This sets the stage for the interviewer to conduct further structured interviews, for which purpose the variables would have been identified.

*Structured Interviews*

Structured interviews are those conducted when it is known at the outset what information is needed. The interviewer has a list of predetermined questions to be posed to the respondents either personally, or through the telephone, or through the medium of a PC. The questions are likely to focus on factors that had surfaced during the unstructured interviews and are considered relevant to the problem. As the respondents express their views, the researcher will note them down. The same questions will be asked of everybody in the same manner. Sometimes, however, based on the exigencies of the situation, the experi-
enced researcher might take a lead from a respondent's answer and ask other relevant questions not on the interview protocol. Through this process, new factors might be identified and a deeper understanding might result. However, to be able to recognize a meaningful response when it is given, the interviewer must comprehend the purpose and goal of each question. This is particularly important when a team of trained interviewers conducts the survey.

Visual aids such as pictures, line drawings, cards, and other materials are also sometimes used in conducting interviews. The appropriate visuals are shown to the interviewees, who then indicate their responses to the questions posed. Marketing research, for example, benefits from such techniques in order to capture the likes and dislikes of customers to different types of packaging, forms of advertising, and so on. Visual aids, including painting and drawing, are particularly useful when children are the focus of marketing research. Visual aids also come in handy when eliciting certain thoughts and ideas that are difficult to express or awkward to articulate.

When a sufficient number of structured interviews has been conducted and adequate information has been obtained to understand and describe the important factors operating in the situation, the researcher would stop the interviews. The information would then be tabulated and the data analyzed. This would help the researcher to accomplish the task set out to be done, as for example, to describe the phenomena, or quantify them, or identify the specific problem and evolve a theory of the factors that influence the problem or find answers to the research question. Much qualitative research is done in this manner.

Training Interviewers

When several long interviews are to be conducted, it is often not feasible for one individual to conduct all the interviews. A team of trained interviewers then becomes necessary. Interviewers have to be thoroughly briefed about the research and trained in how to start an interview, how to proceed with the questions, how to motivate respondents to answer, what to look for in the answers, and how to close an interview. They also need to be instructed on taking notes and coding the interview responses. The tips for interviewing, discussed later, should become a part of their repertoire for interviewing.

Good planning, proper training offering clear guidelines to interviewers, and supervising their work—all help in profitably utilizing the interviewing technique as a viable data collection mechanism. Personal interviews offer rich data that are spontaneously provided by the respondents, in the sense that their answers do not typically fall within a constricted range of responses, as in a questionnaire. However, personal interviews are expensive in terms of time, training costs, and resource consumption.

Review of Unstructured and Structured Interviews

The main purpose of the unstructured interview is to explore and probe into the several factors in the situation that might be central to the broad problem area.
During this process it might become evident that the problem, as identified by
the client, is only the symptom of a more serious and deep-rooted problem. Con-
ducting unstructured interviews with many people in the organization could
result in the identification of several critical factors in the situation. These factors
would then be pursued further during the structured interviews for eliciting more
in-depth information on them. This will help identify the critical problem as well
as solve it. In applied research, a tentative theory of the factors influencing the
problem is often conceptualized on the basis of the information obtained from
the unstructured and structured interviews.

**Some Tips to Follow in Interviewing**

The information obtained during the interviews should be as free of bias as pos-
sible. Bias refers to errors or inaccuracies in the data collected. Biases could be
introduced by the interviewer, the interviewee, or the situation. The interviewer
could bias the data if proper trust and rapport are not established with the inter-
viewee, or when the responses are either misinterpreted or distorted, or when
the interviewer unintentionally encourages or discourages certain types of
responses through gestures and facial expressions.

Attentively listening to the interviewee, evincing interest in what the respon-
dent has to say, exercising tact in questioning, repeating and/or clarifying the
questions posed, and paraphrasing some of the answers to ensure a thorough
understanding of the responses, go a long way in maintaining the interest of the
respondent throughout the interview. Accurately recording the responses is
equally important.

**Interviewees** can bias the data when they do not express their true opinions
but provide information that they think the interviewer expects of them or would
like to hear. Also, if the respondents do not understand the questions, they may
hesitate to seek clarification. They may then answer questions without knowing
what exactly the questions mean, and thus introduce biases.

Some interviewees may be turned off because of personal likes and dislikes,
or the dress of the interviewer, or the manner in which the questions are posed.
They may, therefore, not provide truthful answers, but instead deliberately offer
incorrect responses. Some respondents may also answer questions in a socially
acceptable manner rather than indicate their true sentiments.

Biases could be situational as well, in terms of (1) nonparticipants, (2) trust
levels and rapport established, and (3) the physical setting of the interview. Non-
participation, either because of unwillingness or the inability of the interviewee
to participate in the study, can bias data inasmuch as the responses of the par-
ticipants may be different from those who did not participate (which implies that
a biased, rather than a representative set of responses is likely to be gathered).
Bias also occurs when different interviewers establish different levels of trust and
rapport with their interviewees, thus eliciting answers of varying degrees of
openness. The actual setting itself in which the interview is conducted might
sometimes introduce biases. Some individuals, for instance, may feel uncomfort-
able when interviewed at the workplace and not respond frankly and honestly.
In door-to-door or telephone interviews, when the respondent cannot be reached due to unavailability at that time, callbacks and further contacts should be attempted so that the sample does not become biased (discussed in the next chapter on Sampling). The interviewer can also reduce bias by being consistent with the questioning mode as each person is interviewed, by not distorting or falsifying the information received, and by not influencing the responses of the subjects in any manner.

The preceding biases can be minimized in several ways. The following strategies will be useful for the purpose.

**Establishing Credibility and Rapport, and Motivating Individuals to Respond**

The projection of professionalism, enthusiasm, and confidence is important for the interviewer. A manager hiring outside researchers would be interested in assessing their abilities and personality predispositions. Researchers must establish rapport with and gain the confidence and approval of the hiring client before they can even start their work in the organization. Knowledge, skills, ability, confidence, articulateness, and enthusiasm are therefore qualities a researcher must demonstrate in order to establish credibility with the hiring organization and its members.

To obtain honest information from the respondents, the researcher/interviewer should be able to establish rapport and trust with the interviewees. In other words, the researcher should be able to make the respondent comfortable enough to give informative and truthful answers without fear of adverse consequences. To this end, the researcher should state the purpose of the interview and assure complete confidentiality about the source of the responses. Establishing rapport with the respondents may not be easy, especially when interviewing employees at lower levels. Employees are likely to be suspicious of the intentions of the researchers; they may believe that the researchers are on the management’s “side” and are therefore likely to propose reduction of the labor force, increase in the workload, and so on. Thus, it is important to ensure that everyone concerned is aware of the researchers’ purpose as being one of simply understanding the true state of affairs in the organization. The respondents must be tactfully made to understand that the researchers are not on any particular side; they are not there to harm the staff, and they will provide the results of research to the organization only in aggregates, without disclosing the identity of the individuals. This would help the respondents feel secure about responding.

The researcher can establish rapport by being pleasant, sincere, sensitive, and nonevaluative. Evincing a genuine interest in the responses and allaying any anxieties, fears, suspicions, and tensions sensed in the situation will help respondents to feel more comfortable with the researchers. If the respondent is told the purpose of the study and how the individual was chosen to be one of those interviewed, there would be better communication flow between the parties. Researchers can motivate respondents to give honest and truthful answers by explaining to them that their contribution would indeed help, and that they
themselves may stand to gain from such a survey, in the sense that the quality of life at work for most of them could improve significantly.

Certain other strategies in how questions are posed also help participants to offer less biased responses. These are discussed below.

The Questioning Technique

Funneling. In the beginning of an unstructured interview, it is advisable to ask open-ended questions to get a general idea and form some impressions about the situation. For example a question that could be asked might be:

"What are some of your feelings about working for this organization?"

From the responses to this broad question, further questions that are progressively more focused may be asked as the researcher processes the interviewee's responses and determines some possible key issues relevant to the situation. This transition from broad to narrow themes is called the funneling technique.

Unbiased Questions. It is important to ask questions in a way that would ensure the least bias in the response. For example, "Tell me how you experience your job" is a better question than, "Boy, the work you do must be really boring; let me hear how you experience it." The latter question is "loaded" in terms of the interviewer's own perceptions of the job. A loaded question might influence the types of answers received from the respondent. Bias could be also introduced by emphasizing certain words, by tone and voice inflections, and through inappropriate suggestions.

Clarifying Issues. To make sure that the researcher understands issues as the respondent means to represent them, it is advisable to restate or rephrase important information given by the respondent. For instance, if the interviewee says, "There is an unfair promotion policy in this organization; seniority does not count at all. It is the juniors who always get promoted," the researcher might interject, "So you are saying that juniors always get promoted over the heads of even capable seniors." Rephrasing in this way clarifies the issue of whether or not the respondent considers ability important. If certain things that are being said are not clear, the researcher should seek clarification. For example, if the respondent happened to say, "The facilities here are really poor; we often have to continue working even when we are dying of thirst," the researcher might ask if there is no water fountain or drinking water available in the building. The respondent's reply to this might well indicate that there is a water fountain across the hall, but the respondent would have liked one on his side of the work area.

Helping the Respondent to Think Through Issues. If the respondent is not able to verbalize her perceptions, or replies, "I don't know," the researcher should ask the question in a simpler way or rephrase it. For instance, if a respondent is unable to specify what aspects of the job he dislikes, the researcher might
ask the question in a simpler way. For example, the respondent might be asked which task he would prefer to do: serve a customer or do some filing work. If the answer is “serve the customer,” the researcher might use another aspect of the respondent’s job and ask the paired-choice question again. In this way, the respondent can sort out which aspects of the job he likes better than others.

**Taking Notes.** When conducting interviews, it is important that the researcher makes written notes as the interviews are taking place, or as soon as the interview is terminated. The interviewer should not rely on memory, because information recalled from memory is imprecise and often likely to be incorrect. Furthermore, if more than one interview is scheduled for the day, the amount of information received increases, as do possible sources of error in recalling from memory as to who said what. Information based solely on recall introduces bias into the research. It is possible to record the interviews on tape if the respondent has no objection. However, taped interviews might bias the respondents’ answers because they know that their voices are being recorded, and their anonymity is not completely preserved. Hence, even if the respondents do not object to being taped, there could be some bias in their responses. Before recording or videotaping interviews, one should be reasonably certain that such a method of obtaining data is not likely to bias the information received. Any taping or videotaping should always be done only after obtaining the respondent’s permission.

**Review of Tips to Follow in Interviewing**

Establishing credibility as able researchers with the client system and the organizational members is important for the success of the research project. Researchers need to establish rapport with the respondents and motivate them to give responses relatively free from bias by allaying whatever suspicions, fears, anxieties, and concerns they may have about the research and its consequences. This can be accomplished by being sincere, pleasant, and nonevaluative. While interviewing, the researcher has to ask broad questions initially and then narrow the questions to specific areas, ask questions in an unbiased way, offer clarifications when needed, and help respondents to think through difficult issues. The responses should be transcribed immediately and not be trusted to memory and later recall.

Having looked at unstructured and structured interviews and learned something about how to conduct the interviews, we can now discuss face-to-face and telephone interviews.