

Guide to Knowledge Elicitation Interviews

Purpose

Gather knowledge from individuals in a manner that others will find useful.

Description

Knowledge interviews are conversations between people who have relevant knowledge to share and a person that is responsible for harvesting and eliciting the knowledge for potential use by others at some future point in time.

Approach

The questions provided here have been developed with the customer for the knowledge you want to capture in mind. In addition to these, it is good practice to ask other experts and practitioners for specific questions they think are important to ask of someone experienced in their subject area. It is also helpful to seek questions from novices or people who are new to the subject area.

Careful consideration of the above along with thoughtful preparation and execution will result in elicitation of relevant knowledge that others could benefit from. In practice, it is often helpful to use a one-page reminder (included at the end of this document) for the interviewer to bring to the interview to help ensure the key questions and process steps are followed.

Transcription of the interview is often necessary, especially if you use an audio-recording device to record the interview. This approach is encouraged so that the interviewer can focus on what is being said and not trying to capture everything by hand in note form.

Part 1. Preparation

- Provide the interviewee a few sample questions as part of an Interview Confirmation Letter you send 2-3 days in advance, so they have a chance to start thinking about the topic. Mention that you would like to record the session (so you can concentrate on what is being said) for future reference. Belay any fears they have about this by promising to let them review and edit anything you capture before it publishes...and never break this promise!
- If you have witnessed the project or event take place, or if you've had informal conversations with managers or participants and other users of the knowledge you are gathering, you may know there are a few issues that others would like to hear about. Print out a list of those issues along with the more general questions suggested in the following sections. Rather than forcing the interviewee to follow your list, use it as a checklist at mid-interview and then again near the end of it. You will usually find most of the issues have been covered, and you can ask about the few missing ones.
- At the beginning of the session, ensure the interviewee that the results of interview will be submitted to them for their review and approval prior to any further sharing or publication.
- Try and make this session more of an open conversation than an interview by a journalist. Remember, this is not about what you want to hear, but rather, what the interviewee thinks is important for others to know.

- Ask open-ended questions – rather than ones with “yes or no” answers.
Maintain the interviewee’s energy and train of thought:
 - a. Follow the energy and interests of the interviewee, not what you may have thought were important before you started. Watch the body language and listen to voice inflections. This will tell you where the interviewee’s areas of interest or areas of concern exist.
 - b. Respect the interviewee’s line of thought, and help develop it by asking follow-up questions if you perceive there is more the interviewee would like to say or that more precision is needed.
 - c. Refrain from telling your own stories, or from drawing conclusions on what the interviewee said. Even when reaffirming the interviewee’s point, they will distract him from his own train of thought.
 - d. Once a line of thought is completed then introduce another topic and ask a question in a new direction, to keep the interview moving forward.

Part II. Background and Context

The information gathered from these questions provides a context for the rest of the interview.

1. Name/Title and Current Position/Company

2. What was your role in _____, or in which function(s) did you participate in the _____ effort?

Experienced knowledge harvesters often use a questionnaire to elicit the ‘administrative’ data from people, like their contact details, where they keep relevant files, in what format, etc. This information provides useful context and can be used for organizing and ‘tagging’ the content that’s published.

Part III. Knowledge Specific to Role & Project

These questions pertain to the role and functions identified in Questions 1-2. Start with the first few questions and then select from the rest as the conversation dictates.

- Did the outcome meet your expectations?
- For the functions that you’ve participated in, what are some of the key factors that led to success?
- What surprised you most?
- What frustrated you most?
- What “aha” insights did you gain during the process?
- If you were starting again tomorrow, what would you do differently?
- Describe the steps you’d go through to accomplish X, Y, Z.
- Who are other critical participants in the process and why?

As you hear an answer, ask yourself whether the implicit advice is precise enough as to be followed. We are looking for specific actionable recommendations that a future team could

follow. Once the interviewee finishes answering, and if needed, ask for relevant clarifications. For instance:

- ‘Take enough time’: *How long a time you would say would be appropriate?*
- ‘Everybody should participate’: *What organizations would you say should be involved?*
- ‘This project went really well’: *How does this compare with other projects you have been involved in? What was different this time?*
- ‘This is a difficult problem’: *What makes it difficult?*
- ‘We couldn’t do better’: *What would other teams need to do in the future, in order to assure they do better?*

An iterative questioning process, open question – clarifications as needed – open question – will typically yield more effective results because it encourages people to reflect and “think what they say.”

Part IV. Knowledge as Member of Project Team

These questions seek knowledge that relates to participation on the project team rather than being function-specific.

- What 2 or 3 things would you want to know prior to starting a new effort?
- What is the key piece of advice that you would give to a future project team?

Part V. Wrap-up / Summary

Often the session has created some new knowledge for the interviewee, which builds during the course of your time together. They may have some different things to share at the end of the session than they did at the beginning. These often turn out to be the most valuable questions to ask. (In an emergency, skip right to these!)

- To summarize, what would you say are the three most important pieces of information or knowledge that anyone beginning work on a similar project should know?
- Is there anything you expected me to ask you, or anything not covered that you think might be important?
- What’s one thing no one has ever asked you about _____, that you think is important to share?

Part VI. Completion

After the interview is finished, cover the following items.

- If you haven’t done so already, ask if the interviewee is willing to share materials referred to in the interview. Arrange for receipt of these.
- Confirm the next steps, in particular the fact that you will be sending the interviewee your extracts of the conversation for approval.
- Provide the interviewee with your contact information so that if they think of anything else to share they can get hold of you.

Transcription

In most cases and with the agreement of the interviewee, you will have recorded the session using a digital audio and/or video recorder. It is very helpful to then convert the audio portion of the recording to text to enable distillation (a free, downloadable guide for Knowledge Distillation can be downloaded from www.greenesconsulting.com) of the knowledge into meaningful 'chunks' of content. The use of a professional transcription service is highly recommended. These service providers are typically able to time-stamp the transcribed text, which makes it easy to find key passages of text from the interview. It's a good idea to contact the transcription service provider in advance to ensure that the equipment and audio-recording process you use will meet their requirements for transcription.

Key Learning and Insights

Many knowledge management practitioners have used this knowledge elicitation method and guide to harvest knowledge from a person in a key position that was leaving to take on another role in their company. Their learning is included here to help others benefit from their experience:

Known lessons that were reinforced through their experience using this method include:

- Knowledge elicitation interviews are a good way to assist in retirement transition process.
- Senior level support helped make the initial launch of the knowledge capture process more acceptable to the people involved.
- Providing some of the questions in advance helped to prepare participants.
- It is challenging to have one person serve all roles of interviewer/harvester/distiller – it's a lot of work!
- Harvesting and placing final distillations on a web site is a very useful way to broadly and efficiently share this information.

Other lessons that have emerged from eliciting knowledge from individuals include

- There can be a high level of emotionalism associated with this process...the interview can bring back the 'drama' associated with certain experiences, or the process of reflection people go through during the course of the interview can raise some powerful emotions.
- The interest and energy to participate in the interviews often grows once people start talking.
- It can be a time consuming process depending on the number of interviews performed.
- There is great value in utilizing a professional transcription service and the equipment/process associated with it.
- This can be a real morale booster to the people being interviewed because it shows someone cared enough to ask what they know and have learned through experience.

ONE-PAGE REMINDER for the Interviewer

(bring to the interview session)

Date:

Interview Topic:

Interviewee:

Current role and activity:

Role during project / activity:

This effort aims at improving future results in all projects, in this region and others. All the results of this interview will be submitted to your approval prior to publication.

General Questions:

To provoke reflection

Did the outcome meet your expectations?

Did anything surprise you?

Were there some 'aha' moments?

Was there anything that frustrated you?

For the area of *Role*, what are the key factors for success?

If you were starting again tomorrow, what would you do different?

What is the key piece of advice you would give to a future project team?

To elicit details

What are the key steps in accomplishing *Role*, *Project*

How long a time?

Depends on what?

Good/Bad compared to what?

What made is easy/difficult? What did we do to make it easy/difficult?

What could a future team do, even if the circumstances remain the same?

How did that help / hinder the project?

Issues others would like to learn about or issues opened during the interview:

Artifacts mentioned:

Ask your co-interviewer (interview buddy): Do you have any other questions?

To the interviewee: Thank you very much for your insights.

Is it OK if I contact you about ... ?

I will contact you / send an email with what we extracted from this interview, to make sure we understood correctly and that you approve of it being shared.

This guide is based on the work of the Kent Greenes (www.greeneconsulting.com) & the KM Teams he led at British Petroleum from 1995 to 1999.