Interviews

Interviews can take a variety of forms, for a variety of purposes. Here, our goal is to understand how people currently interact with objects or technology, so that we can design something better. We need to understand what goes wrong, but also what goes right.

It is tempting to begin with a general question, such as "Tell me about your job" or "Explain how this works". Unfortunately, this will most likely result in general answers that provide very little useful information or insights. Most people interpret such questions as an invitation to describe how things are ‘supposed’ to work. But you do not want an instruction manual (you can read that separately), instead, you want to find out what happens in the real world. For this type of interview, we want to take advantage of people’s episodic memory to gather stories of recent events, rather than procedural memory.

It is important that you take advantage of the characteristics of human memory. People do not have video recordings in their heads; instead, they reconstruct their memories from context. The more context you provide, the better. Also, people remember negative events more easily than positive ones, which in turn are easier to remember than neutral events. Finally, people remember recent events more easily than old events. The style of the question also matters greatly: people will unconsciously match the style of their answers to the style of your question. Vague questions usually produce vague answers. The trick is to begin with specific questions that draw out stories of recent, memorable events related to the technology or object you are interested in finding out about.

The following techniques help the person being interviewed to think of concrete examples of things that have really occurred, taking advantage of the reconstructive nature of memory. If you cannot conduct the interview in the setting in which events occurred, use objects or descriptions of the setting to help the person envision the situation better.

Critical Incident Technique: Critical incident technique emphasizes a specific, recent incident. Begin by asking the person to envision a particular incident that occurred within the past week. (In general, the more recent the better, since details are important.) The incident can be a situation that was frustrating, surprising, annoying or even funny. Ask the person to describe the incident, including what happened and why it was memorable. Ask for as many specific details as possible, then encourage the person reflect on why it was not typical. Usually, the person will give an example of a breakdown that occurred, followed by a description of the "normal" way things should work. If you are aware of other recent incidents that others have described to you, ask if they know of the incidents or if similar incidents have happened to them.

Bright Spots: Although negative critical incidents are more memorable and help to uncover problems that need to be resolved, people also find it easy to remember bright spots, situations in which something worked particularly well. Even more interesting are the situations in which the person found a solution to a problem, by adapting either the technology, the behavior or the situation.

Recalling a specific time: A variation of the critical incident technique involves asking the person to describe the events of a specific time and day, say, at 11:00 last Thursday. Even if nothing memorable occurred on that day, the person is likely to explain a 'typical' day; including a number of typical breakdowns. Often, people continue by describing other interesting examples and discuss other kinds of breakdowns that can occur during their work. In general, aim for specific details first, then ask for generalizations. Use this interview technique to contrast the "official" view of the work and with what actually happens.

Life cycle of an object: You can ask the person to describe an “interesting” object. For example, find a document, visible somewhere on the desk, wall or computer screen, and ask for its life history. When did it arrive? Who wrote it and why? What has happened to it since? What is likely to happen to it next? By focusing on the specifics, you can also learn how typical or atypical the situation surrounding this document is, which can spark other stories about related objects and the work practices that surround them.
Preparation: Within your group, decide on your project topic and who your users are. Your goal is to understand what problems they face now, with or without current technology, which will help you to create a new interactive system that helps solve that problem for them.

For example: New students coming from out of town have practical needs, like setting up a bank account and finding housing, as well as social needs, such as meeting people or engaging in sports. If you want to design an app or a website that helps them, you first have to figure out what their current experience is like, as they try to figure these things out for themselves.

Plan several questions in advance, including at least one using critical incident technique. Also, think about what background information you need, such as computer experience or length of time in the job. Assume that your questions will change as you get into the interview setting and that new topics will come up.

Think of additional questions (Who, What, Where, Why and How) as they answer, to give you more detail about how the person uses the system to support their work. Successful interviews should include descriptions of both "normal" and unusual uses of any system. Remember, your goal is to get concrete, specific examples from the users. Save the generalizing for later.

At the interview: First, ask permission! Explain why you are interviewing them.

Begin with the questions you have planned, but do not accept yes/no or limited answers. Probe more deeply, try to get the interviewee to give you a story of what actually happened. Record the sequence of question/answer/question/answer. Do not forget to ask about related stories, both typical and unusual, to contrast with the initial story.

Don’t forget to thank them at the end of the interview!

Mail to: mackay@lri.fr
Subject: 2012 DEIS Interview 1 <LAST_NAME, First_name>

Date/Time/Location of interview

Background: Interviewee (name optional), sex, age, profession, current situation

Topic: What was the interview about?

Questions and Answers: Not just the original question you planned and their answer, but also situations in which you probed deeper for more information.

   Critical incidents (negative memories)
   Bright spots (positive memories)

If relevant, ask about a specific recent time, recent event, or specific object.