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 a particular object: Another variation is to simply ask the person to select an “interesting” object to describe. 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.

Roles:

Individual: Prepare an interview sheet in advance, with room for the person's name, background information, and several interview questions. Leave plenty of room to take notes. Be sure to include the date and location of the interview.

Partner: As above, but alternate between who asks the questions (interviewer) and who takes notes or video (scribe). If you videotape an interview, be sure to ask permission first. (See handout on videotaping an interview.)

Preparation:

Interview sheet should include at least one using critical incident technique question. Consider which background information to collect, 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 the system. Remember, your goal is to get concrete, specific examples and generalize from there. Try to envision the user setting and make some predictions about possible uses.

At the interview:

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 tell you a story of what actually happened. Record the sequence: question/answer/question/answer. Do not forget to ask about related stories, both typical and unusual, to contrast with the initial story.

Video:

If you video a session, be sure to obtain 'informed consent'. If you do not know what that means, do not video the interview.

Prepare a title card with the date, place, time, interviewer(s) and interviewee(s). Shoot the title card with a voice-over that reads this information.

Begin with an “establishing shot” first, to show the general setting.

Shoot over the user’s shoulder so you can see what he or she is discussing. You rarely need to shoot the interviewee's face. Avoid shooting towards a window or strong light source. Limit zooming and panning as much as possible, always begin and end with stable shots in which the camera does not move.
Exercise: Preliminary interviews

What do people do before going to sleep or waking up in the morning when it is dark? Consider different types of people: children, elderly, insomniacs, terminally ill, college students. Consider different situations: travelling, before an exam, sick in bed, when partner is traveling.

Create a series of questions to uncover specific stories that you can use to inspire your design. Use at least one of each of the four types of questions.

Your name:

Who did you interview? (include relevant personal characteristics, not the name)

Date/Time:
Setting:
Topic:

Questions and Answers:

Question:

Answer:

Question:

Answer:

Question:

Answer:

Question:

Answer:
Add additional pages as needed. You do not need to use this format: Depending upon the person you interview, it may consist of one long story, with answers to extra questions that probe deeper, or a series of questions and answers. Always arrive with prepared questions and adjust from there.

Question: ____________________________________________________________

Answer: ____________________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________

Question: ____________________________________________________________

Answer: ____________________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________

Question: ____________________________________________________________

Answer: ____________________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________
Video and Group interviews

Initial preparation: 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 the system. Remember, your goal is to get concrete, specific examples and generalize from there. Try to envision the user setting and make some predictions about possible uses of Post-it notes.

Decide on roles: Before you begin, decide who will ask questions, who will shoot the video, who will take notes (the "scribe"), and who will "just observe". These roles are very important and will affect how you perceive the interview. The camera person will be distracted by the mechanics of shooting the video. (Always assume that shooting video will detract from your ability to observe the situation). The scribe will be thinking about capturing the key elements of the questions and answers, and will get more information from the auditory than the visual channel. The interviewer may also be somewhat distracted by the mechanics of directing the interview. (When you review the video later, think about your role while the video was being shot and what you perceive when you view it afterwards.)

Before the interview: Everyone should write personal predictions about what they think might happen in the interview.

Informed consent: You _always_ need to ask the interviewee for permission before starting an interview. You must always give them the option of saying no, initially or at any time during the interview, without any pressure from you. You must also be very clear about why you are interviewing them and what you will do with the data. Normally, you do not have the right to make their information public, and you should only discuss an anonymized version of their responses to your questions within a restricted class or research setting. Refer to the lecture on informed consent and look at examples of informed consent forms.

At the interview: Take about 15 minutes to observe and/or interview someone about the topic. Begin by introducing yourselves and explain your purpose. For example: “We are taking a course and are interested in real examples of how people do ________ in their daily lives. Would you mind if we spoke to you for a few minutes?”

Tell the person how long the interview is likely to last (10-15 minutes). Always ask if it is OK for you to videotape, even if the videotaping has been pre-arranged, and say what the video will be used for. Some people do not want you to videotape specific. If you have a screen on your video camera, show them what your camera will see. Note that over-the-shoulder shots that emphasize what the person is doing, rather than shots of their faces as they talk, are both more comfortable for the interviewee and usually more informative for you.

Filming: Set up the camera as explained in class. If you have a camera that records onto a device, such as a cassette, label it. If not, shoot a title card with your group number, names of everyone at the interview, plus date, time, location and topic of the interview. Write in LARGE letters, so it can be read. Then, shoot about 10 seconds of the title card, with a voice-over of the topic, date, time, and location and your group number, before you shoot anything else.

After you have explained what you are doing and have the interviewee's consent, you can begin to videotape. Start with a wide-angle shot of the area (establishing shot) to provide context. Avoid using two functions at the same time (e.g. zooming and panning) and move slowly and steadily if you have to move. Pause if you have to move from one location to another. If you must pan or
zoom, do so slowly with stable shots on each end. Try to shoot from behind the person, over the shoulder, so you have the perspective of the person talking as they look at and point to objects they are describing.

**After the interview:** Thank the person for their time. Spend a few minutes after the interview reflecting upon what you heard and write down your overall impressions while they are still fresh. (Everyone in the group should do this, not just the scribe.)

The interviewer should mark the interview sheet to indicate which questions were actually used, how they changed and which new questions arose. The scribe should review his or her notes, then fill in any missing details. The observer should write notes and make observations that the others might have missed. The camera person is responsible for making a copy of the video (and posting the video on the internal website). **NOTE:** you do not have permission to post these videos on Youtube or any other public site.

Everyone should briefly review their predictions and try to identify what was interesting or surprising. How did the real setting contrast with your expectations?

**Preparation for class:** Select a video clip from your data that illustrates something innovative or surprising, an interesting problem or something that could be improved with the addition of the computer. Prepare a title card with key information: Group number, group members, interview time, date, setting. Choose one or more illustrative clips that you can discuss with the class.