



Using Interviews in a Foresight Process

Interviews are a common source of information in Horizons' foresight studies. They can help us better understand the system or domain under study, confirm or reject baseline assumptions, discover or confirm weak signals, insights and change drivers, and challenge emerging thinking around an issue.

Horizons generally uses semi-structured and informal interviews to explore ideas with an informant. Like in most qualitative research, the aim of foresight interviews is usually to understand the individual's perceptions and way of thinking about the topic at hand. When possible, we also aim to push an informant's thinking forward and probe their mental model of the future. This can be difficult with people who are not accustomed to thinking 10–15 years in advance, but when it works it can yield creative and useful ideas. At other times, we interview to get basic information. The specific goal for each of your interviews should inform how you plan and conduct them. Below are some factors you may wish to consider in your design.

Tips for a Good Interview

1. Clarifying your purpose

- Be clear on why you are doing the interview and what information you hope to get from the person you will be speaking with.
 - What is the goal of the interview?
 - What is the broad research focus? Specific information needs?
 - Do a quick web search on your informant to give you a sense of what they may be able to provide for you. Is this the right person? Are there specific things to ask this person because of their expertise?
 - How structured or unstructured should this interview be? Factors to consider include:
 - time (less structured often takes longer but can be richer)
 - the type of information you are hoping to get
 - the number of people involved in the interview (it can be messy to have too many people asking questions in an unstructured interview)
 - the setting

2. Preparing for the interview

- Is there any background reading that you need to do to interact effectively on this topic?
- Draft a list of guiding questions to use during the interview:
 - What will get this person talking about what you most want to know? Open-ended questions are more effective in qualitative research than closed-ended questions. They engage informants by giving them the space to share what is meaningful to them, and may yield rich ideas that can be further explored.
 - Preparing prompts or sub-questions for your overarching questions is key to encouraging the informant to tell you more, especially in cases where your first questions don't elicit much response. Always have some prompts ready.
 - Consider flow: working from general to specific with your questions is often helpful. Asking detailed or leading questions can sometimes shut down an informant, so if there's something specific to ask you may want to save it until the end.
 - How much time you will have with your informant and whether or not you will be able to follow up with them again may determine what you decide to ask. You may want to prioritize your questions.
- Prepare the informant:
 - Let them know in advance why you are interviewing them and what you hope to get from them.
 - Consider sending material that would help them understand where you are coming from (past reports, current report draft, a few overarching questions, a cascade diagram or system map you've developed, etc.) so that they can think ahead about what really matters to you.
 - This will help some people feel more comfortable, as well as give them a greater chance to think about your topic and provide relevant information and perspectives. However, be aware that it may also "lead" the informant in the direction of your thinking.
- Make sure you have everything you need to take verbatim notes.

3. During the interview

- Take time to make the informant comfortable—introduce people and the topic, explain how information will be used (including reviewing confidentiality issues, etc.).
- Share whatever you need to ensure that you are on the same page—remind them of the purpose and what you hope to learn from them, ask if they have any questions for you, etc.
- Ask an easy, open-ended question to start with. People relax when they can talk about something they know and that matters to them.
- Link their expertise to the future in an easy way for them. For example, ask what they think the most significant changes in the next 30-50 years might be in their area of expertise. (30 – 50 years is more likely to yield information about 10-20 years).
- Spend (much!) more time listening than talking:

- Your responses should always be aimed at 1) encouraging the informant to share and disclose, or 2) guiding the interview in a particular direction (e.g. shifting the topic, moving to another question, getting more or less technical, wrapping up, etc.).
- If you inject your own views too much in the interview, this may lead the informant to mirror your thinking. It will often make the informant much less forthcoming.
- Widen and narrow the focus of your interview and shift the topic with different types of questions.
- Take down as many verbatim notes as possible throughout the interview.

4. After the interview

- Review your notes and write down as much as you can remember from the interview. Some block out as much time after the interview as during to get all their memory into notes. You won't remember most of this the next day.
- Reflect on anything you learned that could help make the next interview even better. What went well, and what could be improved?
- Revise your interview questions (for clarity, to be more strategic about getting the information you would like, etc.).
- Revisit your interview goal:
 - Was it met? What might you need to follow-up on?
- Follow up on any commitments made to your informant (thank-you e-mail, contacts or information you promised to share, final copy of research paper, etc.).

For more information:

http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-refugee-and-disaster-response/publications_tools/publications/pdf/pr_section_3.PDF

<http://www.qualres.org/HomeInte-3595.html>

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