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The Interview as a Goal-Directed Dialogue

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Abstract

An interview is fundamentally a goal-directed exchange between the interviewer and the respondent, an interaction explicitly designed to fulfil a conscious and shared purpose. This paper examines various categories of interviews classified by the manner in which they are conducted and by the objectives they are intended to serve. The interviewing process begins with an opening phase and advances through a structured sequence of actions directed at the desired outcome. Throughout this process, a skilled interviewer draws upon specific techniques and competencies to help the respondent meet the objectives of the encounter. The central aim of this paper is to offer a thorough understanding of the interviewing process and the core competencies required for effective interviewing.

Keywords: interview, purposeful conversation, interviewing skills

1. Introduction

Interviewing is a practiced art that unfolds across numerous professional contexts, yielding varying levels of satisfaction for both parties involved. Professionals from diverse fields, including law, counseling, medicine, and journalism, routinely engage in formal interviewing as a significant component of their work. While the most evident characteristic of an interview is that it involves communication between two people, not every dialogue between two individuals qualifies as an interview. A casual exchange between friends, for instance, does not constitute one. An interview is not simply a conversation, it is a purposeful, directed exchange in which one party, the interviewer, assumes responsibility for steering the dialogue toward a predetermined objective.

Professional interviews are distinguished from informal exchanges by the fact that they operate within a framework of specialized knowledge and skill, a well-defined contextual setting, and recognized professional competence. At its most basic, an interview may be defined as a dialogue with an intentional purpose, one that is mutually acknowledged and accepted by both participants. It is typically conducted face-to-face and encompasses both verbal and non-verbal communication, through which information, attitudes, and emotions are shared.

2. Distinguishing An Interview From Ordinary Conversation

The defining characteristic that sets an interview apart from general conversation is that it is structured around a conscious purpose. An interaction without a goal may be a conversation, but it cannot be termed an interview. Key distinctions include:

- An interview has a defined purpose that shapes its content, whereas conversation tends to be associated and lacks a unifying theme.
- One participant, the interviewer, must take deliberate charge of the interaction and guide it toward the goal; in conversation, both parties share equal responsibility for its direction.
- In an interview, one person asks and the other answers, because purposeful inquiry requires someone to lead; both participants are engaged in solving the problem of one.
- The interviewer's actions must be planned and intentional; in conversation, participants may behave spontaneously without prior planning.
- An interview demands the interviewer's complete and undivided attention, whereas conversation may occur alongside other activities.
- An interview is typically a formally scheduled event with a predetermined time, location, and duration.
- Because the interview has a serious purpose, difficult or uncomfortable subjects are not avoided; general conversation, by contrast, usually involves an implicit agreement to sidestep the unpleasant.

Categories Of Interviews

Based on how they are conducted, interviews fall into three broad categories:

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1. **Structured Interview:** Also referred to as a controlled, guided, or directive interview, this format relies on a pre-established questionnaire. The interviewer adheres strictly to the prescribed questions, makes no personal additions, and maintains the original wording, offering clarification only where necessary.
 2. **Unstructured Interview:** Also known as an uncontrolled or non-directive interview, this format involves no predetermined questions. The interviewer develops lines of inquiry as the session unfolds, typically in the form of open discussion. The primary aim is to allow the respondent to express themselves freely and spontaneously.
 3. **Mixed or Depth Interview:** This format blends structured and unstructured elements. The respondent retains the freedom to self-express, while a set of structured questions provides a common baseline for comparing responses across different respondents.

Classified by their purpose, interviews fall into three further categories:

4. **Information-Gathering or Social Assessment Interview:** Its aim is to obtain a comprehensive account of the individual's social functioning. The data collected enables the interviewer to understand the respondent in the context of a specific social problem, forming the necessary foundation for effective intervention.
5. **Diagnostic Interview:** This type is oriented toward evaluating and identifying: (a) the nature of the problem or difficulty; (b) the contributing factors; and (c) what elements can realistically be changed or modified.
6. **Therapeutic Interview:** The objective here is to bring about positive change in the respondent, in their social circumstances, or in both. Through targeted remedial measures, this type of interview seeks to shift the respondent's feelings, attitudes, and behaviors in ways that improve their capacity for social functioning.

3. The Interviewing Process And Associated Skills

The interviewing process is organized into three conceptually distinct phases: the Introductory Phase, the Developmental Phase, and the Final Phase. While clear boundaries between phases may not always be maintained in practice, separating them conceptually facilitates a clearer understanding of each stage. Interviewing is an art that can be progressively refined through practice, provided it is grounded in adequate theoretical knowledge. The interviewer is continuously engaged in the effort to perceive, comprehend, and respond to what the respondent is communicating, openly or otherwise.

4. The Introductory Phase

The opening phase is of particular importance because it establishes the tone, atmosphere, and direction conducive to productive exchange. The skills most relevant to this phase are:

1. **Preliminary Review:** The interviewer examines and consolidates available background information about the respondent prior to the meeting, enabling a firmer grasp of relevant facts.
2. **Logistical Preparation:** This involves the practical organization of the meeting, scheduling the appointment, securing an appropriate and private setting, arranging the physical environment, and attending to one's own professional appearance.
3. **Advance Planning:** The interviewer formulates a broad but adaptable plan for the session, outlining what information is needed and from whom, so that the interview can begin coherently with a tentative shared purpose.
4. **Self-Introduction:** At the outset, the interviewer introduces themselves by name, professional role, and organizational affiliation. A warm greeting and composed demeanor help establish initial rapport.
5. **Purpose Clarification:** The interviewer communicates the aim of the session clearly and in proportionate terms, neither so ambitious as to be unachievable nor so vague as to be meaningless.
6. **Probing and Questioning:** Once purpose is agreed upon, the interviewer uses probes to elicit relevant facts, ideas, and feelings. Questioning serves two ends: gathering specific information and redirecting conversation from peripheral to pertinent areas. Closed-ended questions elicit brief responses and are useful in urgent situations; open-ended questions invite elaboration and deeper reflection (e.g., 'What happened next?' or 'How did that make you feel?').
7. **Reflecting Feelings:** The interviewer mirrors the emotional content of the respondent's words, requiring a nuanced emotional vocabulary to accurately paraphrase the feelings and experiences being shared.

5. The Developmental Phase

1. **Organizing Descriptive Information:** The first step of the assessment process involves categorizing the information gathered during exploration into a structured, retrievable form.
2. **Analysis:** This involves scrutinizing the collected information in detail to identify critical themes, patterns, and causal elements within the respondent's situation.

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3. **Synthesis:** Building on analysis, synthesis integrates significant pieces of information into a coherent whole by connecting them to theoretical frameworks, experiential knowledge, and professional understanding.
 4. **Reflecting the Problem:** The interviewer conveys that they understand the respondent's perspective on the identified difficulty, practicing active empathic listening. Some respondents may need encouragement before they are willing to articulate their concerns openly.
 5. **Developing a Working Approach:** Interviewer and respondent collaboratively identify the target of change, who will be involved in the process, and how change efforts might affect others, arriving at a shared strategy to guide their work.
 6. **Attending and Minimal Encouragement:** Observable engagement cues, sustained eye contact, open body posture, signal genuine attentiveness. Brief verbal prompts such as 'go on,' 'I see,' or nodding serve to validate the respondent and encourage continued disclosure.
 7. **Summarizing and Recapitulation:** Periodic summaries consolidate what has been covered, highlight gaps, give direction to the session, and confirm to the respondent that they have been heard and understood.
 8. **Transitions:** When a topic has been fully explored, the interviewer smoothly shifts to a new area of discussion without disrupting the relational dynamic.
 9. **Advising:** The interviewer may offer suggestions or recommendations, while always making clear that the respondent retains full autonomy to accept or decline any advice given.
 10. **Confrontation:** The interviewer draws the respondent's attention, directly, calmly, and without judgment, to inconsistencies or contradictions in their statements, emotions, or behavior. Skillfully applied, confrontation can be a powerful catalyst for insight.

6. The Final Phase

1. **Process Review:** This cooperative skill involves both parties reflecting on the journey they have undertaken together, tracing progress, shifts, and significant moments over the course of the interaction.
2. **Evaluation:** The interviewer engages the respondent in a concluding assessment of the degree to which goals have been achieved and problems addressed.
3. **Recording and Documentation:** Once the interview concludes, the interviewer systematically documents the interaction. Records should be written in plain, accessible language.
4. **Essential Qualities Of An Effective Interviewer**
5. Drawing on the framework proposed by Cournoyer, the following personal and professional qualities are considered indispensable for an effective interviewer:
6. **Empathy:** Baker (1991) defines empathy as 'the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person.' Empathy allows the interviewer to connect meaningfully with the respondent, fostering rapport and sustaining a productive working relationship.
7. **Respect:** Rogers (1957) characterized respect as the expression of unconditional positive regard. The interviewer must hold the respondent in equal regard regardless of social class, background, or economic status, and must honor the respondent's fundamental right to self-determination.
8. **Authenticity:** Authenticity involves engaging with the respondent in a genuine, transparent, and non-defensive manner. An authentic interviewer communicates naturally, without appearing scripted or contrived, though this does not grant license to say or do anything without professional discretion.
9. **Self-Awareness:** A skilled interviewer must engage in continuous self-exploration and self-discovery in order to deploy their own personality effectively as a professional tool in service of the respondent.
10. **Self-Regulation:** Difficult, emotionally charged situations demand disciplined management of the interviewer's own feelings and reactions. Words and actions must consistently align with the values and ethics of the profession.
11. **Ethical Competence:** The interviewer must demonstrate a thorough and consistent understanding of professional ethics, obligations, and the legal dimensions of their role.
12. **Professional Knowledge:** Comparable to a painter without a brush, an interviewer without domain-specific knowledge is rendered ineffective. Keeping abreast of developments in the field is a professional responsibility.
13. **Responsible Assertiveness:** The interviewer must be capable of expressing professional judgment and boundaries appropriately, neither passively nor aggressively.

7. Guiding Principles For Effective Interviewing

- Effective interviewing is built on a genuine understanding of human nature, behavior, and motivation.
- The physical setting must be carefully considered, it should offer privacy, a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere, and freedom from noise and interruption.
- The duration of the interview should be calibrated to its purpose, neither excessively brief nor unnecessarily prolonged.
- The respondent should be made to feel comfortable and encouraged to speak candidly; creating an atmosphere of ease is the interviewer's responsibility.
- The relationship between interviewer and respondent is of paramount importance. The interviewer must remain mindful of the impression their presence, appearance, and demeanor may be creating.
- Communication must be pitched at the respondent's level, intellectually and emotionally accessible, with language adapted accordingly.
- Attentive listening is a core professional competency. The effective interviewer directs maximum concentration toward the respondent's experience and minimizes self-focused thoughts.
- Silence must be respected. Pauses may convey more than words; a premature intervention can permanently foreclose important disclosures.
- Questioning is an art. Questions should be simple, appropriate in number and tone, and attuned to both the purpose of the interview and the emotional state of the respondent.
- Non-verbal signals are as informative as spoken words. The interviewer must remain alert to what is communicated through body language, facial expression, and silence.
- Personal biases, prejudices, and subjective emotions must be rigorously set aside; they have no place in the professional interviewing context.

Once the purpose of the interview has been achieved, the interaction is formally concluded. The subsequent step, systematic documentation, is an integral part of the professional interview process. All records should be composed in straightforward, accessible language.

8. References

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