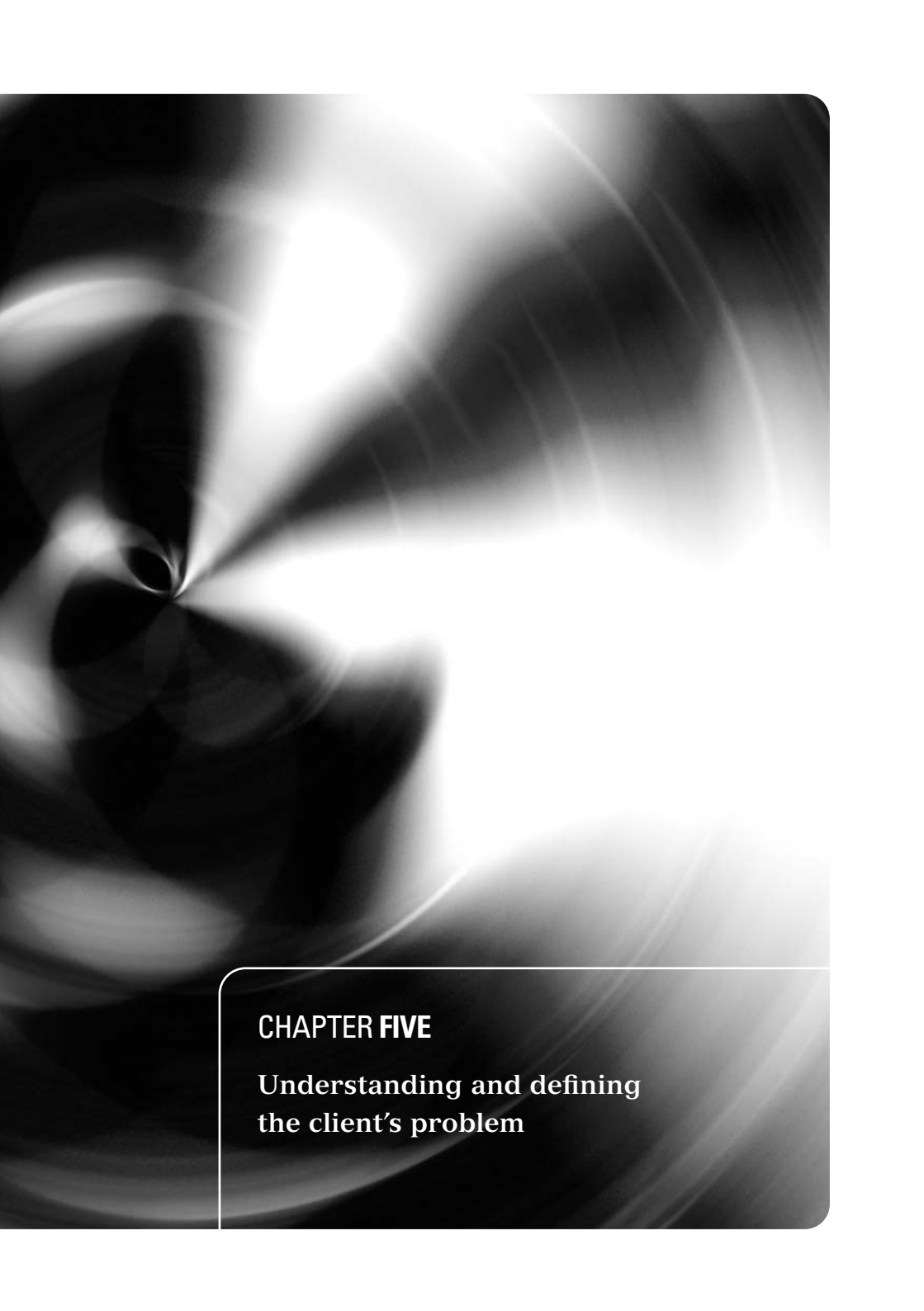




CHAPTER FIVE

Understanding and defining
the client's problem

FIVE

Understanding and defining the client's problem

Once your initial terms of reference or proposal has been agreed by your client you have to really begin to understand your client's problem. This requires a detailed, analytical review of the issues or circumstances surrounding the problem. In defining any business problem you need to maintain a clear and independent perspective at all times. Don't be prejudiced by past experiences or easily persuaded by emotive arguments or persuasive people. Maintaining a detached and objective outlook is essential to your success.

In understanding your client's problem endeavour to gather information from a variety of individuals and sources. Information on consultancy projects is normally collected through five key methods:

- 1 Desk research
- 2 Interviews
- 3 Group interviews
- 4 Questionnaires
- 5 Process mapping techniques

In this chapter we explore the essential characteristics of each and provide some key advice on how to use them to secure benefit for your client projects. Two key factors that will help you determine the most appropriate methods to use are, firstly, the number of people you can reasonably expect to involve given any time constraints and secondly, the depth of knowledge you need to fully understand the problem. Figure 11 illustrates the relationship of these two factors to the different approaches.

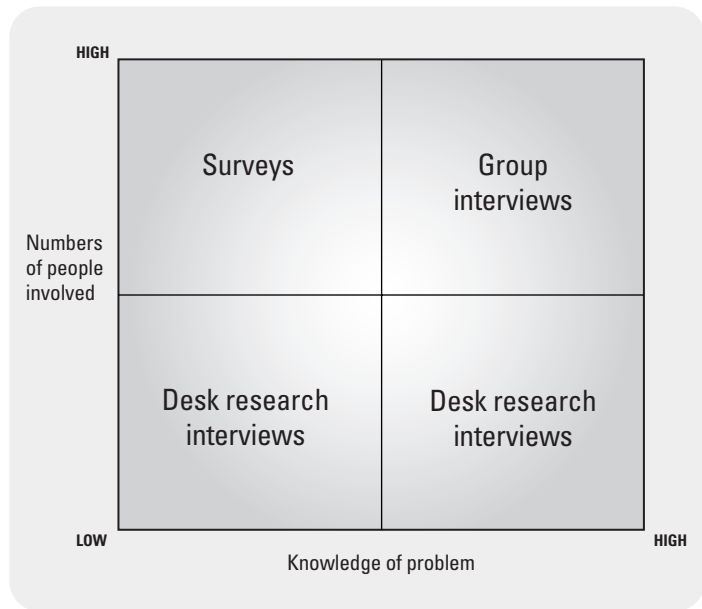


FIGURE 11: INFORMATION GATHERING TECHNIQUES

Desk research

In most cases desk research is conducted in the early stages of a project, although there may be circumstances where it will be required during the middle of a project. Desk research involves the identification and analysis of specific sources of documentary evidence that maybe relevant to your project. Of course there are lots of projects where any desk research is limited to reading up on some background papers or documents such as previous reports. But there may be other times where you will need to access a wide variety of information sources in preparation for the start of a project. In all situations you will need to apply a disciplined and analytical approach to your work so as to identify the relevant sources of information and record the key points for your future project work.

Desk research normally involves three stages:

- 1 Identification of relevant sources of information.
- 2 Review and analysis of the information sources.
- 3 Preparation of key findings and conclusions resulting from the research.

It may require you to review these sources of information:

- Organization reports
- Procedures and operating manuals
- Competitor publications
- Financial reports
- Technical journals
- Professional association reports and journals
- Trade journals
- Specialist journals
- Business magazines
- Government reports
- Consultancy surveys and reports
- Industry association reports
- Relevant books

Desk research helps build up a real understanding of a particular issue. In some cases it may result in you producing a report highlighting your key findings as part of the wider project being undertaken.

Interviewing clients

Preparing your interview structure

The first point to emphasis when interviewing people during the course of any project or assignment, is that everyone is a client; or they have the potential to become a client. It is therefore important to always conduct yourself with the utmost courtesy and professionalism; even when interviewing people who are in extreme circumstances unhelpful or even impolite. Treat everyone with equal respect. As an internal consultant you can never predict when you might end up working for someone you have interviewed. So always exercise care when conducting interviews. To upset or annoy someone today may not be a problem, but next year when you stand before them trying to secure a new piece of work it will be a different matter.

Any interview is a simple way of gaining information through questioning and discussion. Client interviews must be controlled by the consultant and have a clear set of objectives and structure. At the same time the interview must not give the impression of being an interrogation. To harass people over questions will only antagonise and result in negative outcomes.

Also be sure to avoid allowing any personality conflicts or personal likes and dislikes to cloud your judgement during an interview. Stay detached and objective at all times.

In preparing for interviews develop a checklist of all the issues you want to discuss. A broad range of questions will tend to be more helpful than a detailed list. The questions you will ultimately ask will depend on the replies and reactions you receive as the interview progresses. Be flexible in your approach. Having a checklist of questions provides you with more scope to adjust the focus and flow of your interview.

The key objective of any information gathering interview is to get your client talking. Again use the magical 80:20 Pareto rule; with your client speaking for 80% of the time and you asking questions for the remaining 20%. If you dominate an interview it is likely that you will leave it not having understood your client's viewpoint or, even worse, their problem. Your ability to listen rather than talk is critical. The most successful client interviews are those where you simply use a small but select number of open-ended questions and your client provides all the relevant information. A bad interview is where you do the talking for most of the time. That is the sign that you are operating as the expert consultant.

Your behaviour during the initial stages will tend to determine the level of trust that will exist throughout the interview. You therefore need to display lots of interest and empathy with your client. Accelerate this process by offering to share control of the interview and jointly agreeing the agenda.

At the interview's beginning you will need to establish your credibility as well as deal with any anxieties the client may have about the process. If you appear worried or nervous you can sometimes arouse similar tensions in less confident interviewees.

There is no need to present a highly detailed explanation of your technical qualifications and career details as this can be interpreted by some clients as demonstrating a lack of confidence or, even worse, arrogance. Your objective should be to instil in the client a sense of comfort and mutual respect. So keep it simple and state who you are, your role, some general background to the interview and your objectives for the meeting.

In developing and planning your interview approach keep to the following guidelines:

- Analyse in advance any background information on your client's operation, e.g. problem areas, performance indicators, key personalities, current business challenges, competitor threats.
- State clearly your aims and objectives for the interview.
- Decide on the topics you want to focus on – preferably with the aid of a checklist.
- Prepare and then plan your interview structure.
- Allocate timings for each section of your interview.
- Find out and agree with your client where the interview will take place. As a general rule people are more comfortable in their own surroundings. They will also have easy access to any additional information you may require.
- When making an interview appointment with clients always confirm the purpose and objectives of the meeting.
- Ideally write to them in advance of any interview to confirm the details. Enclose a draft agenda for the meeting. This helps to offset any concerns they may have about the interview and it also helps prepare them to deal with the issues you want to discuss.
- Refer to your written agenda during the interview and use it as a means of controlling the pace of your interview. It will help you to move the client forward if they are staying too long on one subject area.

- If you are interviewing together with a colleague make sure you agree clear roles beforehand. Allocate questions or specific topic areas to each other. Give your client a professional impression and show that you both have strong roles in the project. Having one consultant sitting and not asking any questions for an entire interview does little to instil client confidence. Even worse it could give the impression that you are wasteful and inefficient.
- Agree with your client that there will be no interruptions to the interview.



Insight

Internal consultants always try to 'Hunt in Pairs.'

Interviewing client alone can be difficult as it is very easy to get locked into a pattern of discussion and not realise that you have lost track or control. By working with another colleague you can develop specific roles and help each other if one of you gets into difficulties.

Hunting in pairs also helps when reviewing the interview afterwards.

Managing the client interview

At the start of any interview outline the purpose of the interview and again check the interviewee's understanding of the objectives. Even if you have previously sent a written confirmation to a client it maybe the case that they did not read it properly or they have forgotten about it. After having indicated the time you require for the interview politely request the assistance and agreement of the interviewee to your objectives. Ask your client whether they wish to add anything to the interview agenda. These formal courtesies may seem a little elaborate but they do help overcome any potential hostility that might in some instances be surrounding a project

Your questioning technique should allow your client to follow their own line of thought provided they do not move too far away from the areas you want to focus on. Be conscious of any time constraints that you or your client maybe working under. Remember that people are likely to disclose more when they feel comfortable and free to express themselves. Adopting an aggressive questioning stance is not necessary and will only result in your interviewee becoming antagonised and refusing to offer any real information. Also avoid interrupting or being overly critical of anything they may say. You may need to challenge them on some points but you can do this without adopting a hostile questioning technique.

At the end of your interview summarise what the client has stated and thank them for their help and co-operation. Also request permission to come back to them for additional information should your work require it.



Insight

A professional way to end an interview is to ask your client:

‘Is there anything that we have not discussed or raised that you think maybe relevant to the work we are undertaking?’

In most cases you will get a neutral response but on some occasions you will get some really important piece of information that will help your overall project.

Equally this question has the nice effect of handing over the close of the interview to your client.

Managing client interviews – a checklist of good practice



- Make your client feel comfortable – put them at ease by a clear introduction.
- Ensure your client is clear about the objectives for the interview.
- Obtain your client’s agreement to your objectives.
- Allow the client to add to the scope of the interview if they wish.
- Ask for permission to take notes during the interview.
- State how you intend to handle issues of confidentiality – being open and honest will help you establish rapport and trust.
- Outline what will happen with the information you are collecting.
- Encourage your client to do most of the talking.

- Use open-ended questions at the beginning of the interview.
- Follow-up client answers by using probing questions that elicit more details about issues..
- Confirm your understanding of what has been said by summarising regularly.
- Try not to be drawn into making specific comments on controversial issues and do not align yourself to any one viewpoint.
- Never criticise other people or departments.

ALSO DON'T FORGET TO:

- Keep on track with your interview structure.
- Ensure all your topic areas are covered.
- Ask for information on any new issues that emerge during the interview.
- Obtain specific examples, details or facts of what your client is trying to explain.
- Recognise irritation on the part of your client.
- Thank your interviewee for their time and assistance.
- Advise them about what will happen next.

THINGS TO AVOID DURING INFORMATION GATHERING INTERVIEWS:

- Talking too much at your client.
- Unnecessary jargon – it irritates clients and provides some with a ready opportunity to criticise you or your work; if not during the interview then almost certainly later with their colleagues.
- Interrupting your client.
- Making assumptions about the interviewee's views or opinions – check out or challenge all assumptions.

- Asking leading or multiple questions.
- Antagonising your client through aggressive behaviour.
- Running out of time.

Taking interview notes

Information that is obtained during any interviews should be recorded during the interview. Most consultants have to work hard at improving the quality of their note-taking. It can be a difficult task to take precise and detailed notes during a lengthy interview and you will need to develop a disciplined approach so as not to end up with pages of scribbled and semi-intelligible comments. Firstly record the name and role of the interviewee and the date on which the interview took place. At first this sounds obvious but again it is amazing how after you have interviewed perhaps twenty-five people, you look at a set of notes and wonder whose comments they belong to. The combined use of your broad list of questions and topic headings should assist you in structuring the information as the interview proceeds.

You will also need to review the information you obtain to check that it provides you with what you require to carry out your investigation or research. Clearly, the disciplined and analytical approach involved in collecting information is equally necessary in recording it.

Actions to take after an interview

- Write down a full account of the interview as soon as possible.
- Send a copy of your interview notes to the interviewee so that they can check and correct any misunderstandings or, alternatively, add any relevant points that may have been missed. This makes for clear communications and also presents a thorough and professional image.



Insight

When your client is discussing sensitive information it pays to be careful in how you take notes. Making detailed notes as your client reveals their inner most thoughts about the organization's problems or politics will not induce a sense of comfort. Try to listen and then make notes after the discussion has moved off the delicate information. This will get over your client feeling that you are some kind of policeman.

Group interviews

Group interviews involve situations where for efficiency or operational concerns you decide to interview a group of people for your project. In some situations you may be faced with a group of production workers taking an extended lunch-break to accommodate your project schedule. Alternatively, you maybe asked to interview a group of managers at the end of one of their regular review meetings. In many respects the basic requirements of handling these types of interviews are the same as one-to-one situations.

However, you do need to be aware that in certain circumstances there may be requirements to ensure everyone has an equal contribution and that the discussions are not dominated by the more forceful or dominant members of the group. To that extent you may need to exercise strong control. One way that you can do this is to introduce the concept of ground-rules to guide peoples' behaviour during the discussions. Five simple but powerful examples are shown overleaf.

Ground rules for controlling group interviews

- 1 Only one person speaks at a time** – a basic discipline, but one that often needs to be enforced in group situations to avoid several discussions taking place at once.
- 2 People can agree to disagree** – this helps you move the discussion forward if it appears to be getting bogged down between a minority of participants.
- 3 It is OK to be negative but try to also offer positive alternative solutions or ideas to address the problem** – this can help you manage people to be positive in their attitude. In some situations a group interview can degenerate into a negative spiral unless they are managed properly.
- 4 Hierarchy is left at the door** – this can be helpful if you are having to manage a cross-section of people and believe there maybe concerns about status influencing peoples' views.
- 5 Let's be hard on the issue and soft on the people** – this rule helps you focus people on getting to issues concerning problem areas rather than allowing personal recriminations to take place which can often happen in heated situations.

As the consultant, introduce these ground-rules at the outset of the group meeting and state that they are there to help ensure a productive exchange of views. Having introduced them it is essential that you police them during the meeting in order to derive the real benefit.

Using structured frameworks to obtain information

In group situations involving larger groups of say, 12 or more people you may consider introducing some structured group work to solicit everyone's views. To do this you might break them up into groups of 4-6 people and task them with discussing a set of specific questions and reporting back. In these types of situation you might typically use the classic SWOT analysis that requires a review of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of a particular situation.

Figure 12 illustrates the SWOT framework.

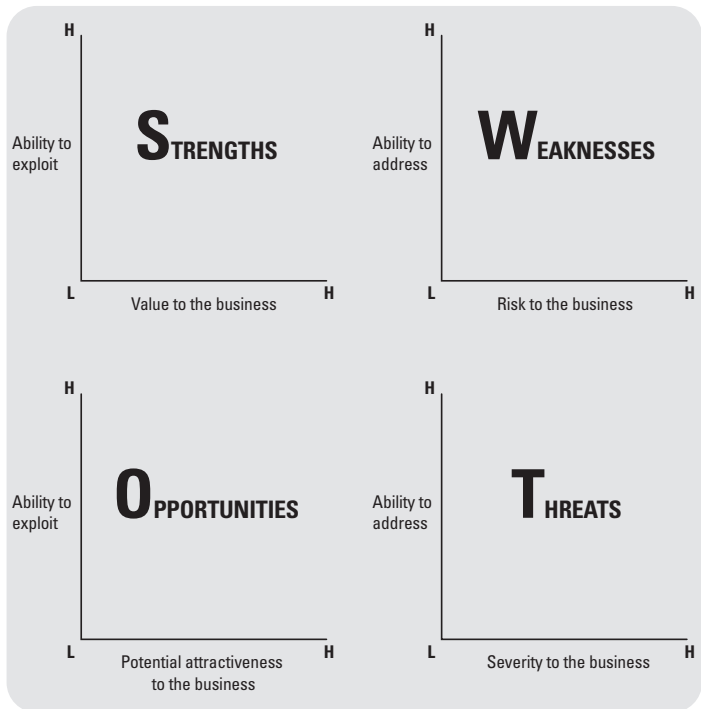


FIGURE 12: USING A SWOT ANALYSIS TO GATHER AND ASSESS INFORMATION

After having introduced the framework you would instruct small groups of people to spend 20-30 minutes producing their SWOT analysis on how they viewed a specific problem or situation. As the internal consultant you would then ask someone from each group to present back their analysis. You can lead a general discussion to clarify your understanding of what is being presented.

Once an overview of the SWOT analysis has been presented you can use some additional and very powerful questions to promote further discussion, e.g. What is the risk or severity of that weakness/threat actually happening? If we did invest more in that strength, what business benefit would it derive? Often these questions help provide greater focus on the key issues surrounding a problem.

Remember also that the SWOT analysis is a really useful and simple structure to conduct one-to-one interviews. You can simply keep asking a client to highlight the strengths and weaknesses etc until they are complete. You also have an easy way to collate your interview notes.

Another analytical tools that can be easily used in group situations is the forcefield analysis. This requires highlighting a particular problem or objective and then asking people to brainstorm or relate their experiences to the issue. In using the framework you have to direct peoples' thoughts and discussions into two distinct areas.

The driving or forcing factors are those that people believe are capable of helping solve the problem or achieving the objective. In contrast the blockers or obstacles are those factors that people believe are currently preventing the problem being addressed or the objective being achieved.

When structuring these exercises, provide people with flip-charts and working papers including 'post-it' notes to help them build up the information. The power of both the

SWOT and forcefield models are their ability to display a lot of potentially complex information in a simple visual format.

Figure 13 provides a simple outline of the forcefield approach.

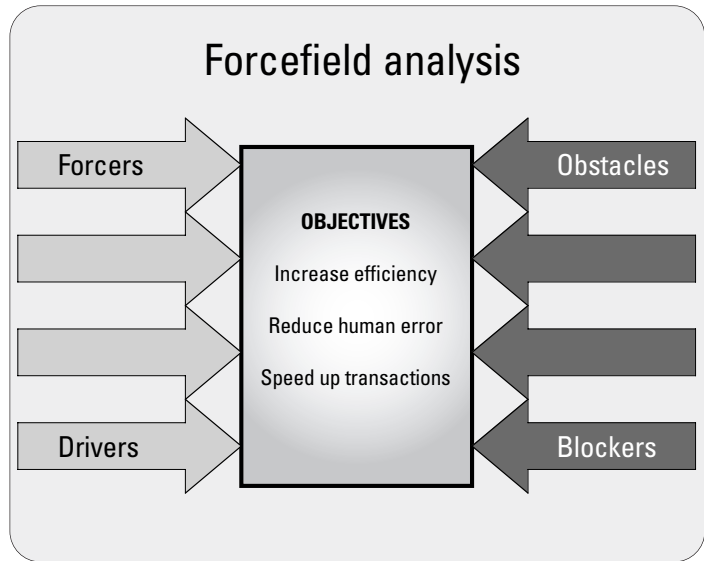


FIGURE 13: FORCEFIELD ANALYSIS

Both frameworks also enable people to present their views and opinions in a structured and focused way. This means you are also able to collect information in an efficient and controlled manner.

They are also an effective means of recording the outcomes of a meeting as each group will have presented their views on flip-chart paper. This means the data can be easily typed up and edited.

Both frameworks are also very simple to explain and highly participative in their approach. Two essential ingredients to getting the best out of any group interview situation.

Types of interview questioning techniques

With your overall interview objectives already in mind there are several types of questioning technique you can use to collect information. Begin at the outset of any interview considering whether you are trying to:

- Obtain hard facts?
- Clarify your understanding of a process, issue or problem?
- Get your interviewee to comment on an idea or proposition?
- Challenge your interviewee's thinking?
- Understand the attitudes and feelings surrounding an issue?
- Assess the interviewee?

Once you have answered these questions you can then employ a wide range of techniques to elicit client responses. Developing confidence with these questions and techniques will come naturally as you gain more experience of interviewing people. In the early days of your consulting work, experiment with these techniques and don't be too worried if on certain occasions they do not always produce the desired results. Interviewing is a skill that develops over time.

Using open-ended questions

Open-ended questions are an essential element in any consultant's interview toolkit as they prevent your client providing simple one word replies. Open-ended questions encourage people to talk and are particularly helpful during the initial stages of an interview, as they promote positive rapport and dialogue.

Open-ended questions are also highly effective in either introducing new topics or probing for more detailed information on a particular subject.

The most powerful open-ended questions begin with: **What? Why? When? How? Where? and Who?**

Examples of open-ended questions

- What was actually happening at that point...?
- How would you describe the current situation?
- What are the current facts as regards service levels?
- What are the performance figures relating to the system?
- What were the objections raised by the customer?
- Where is the unit at this present point in time?
- When was the discrepancy first identified?
- What do you see as the three major issues facing your operation?
- Why did that situation remain in place for so long?
- How are the current systems managed?
- How would you describe the current strengths of the operation?
- Who had the primary responsibility?

- When did the situation begin to worsen?
- When did management realise that the project was beginning to slip?
- What other issues have contributed to the problem?
- When did you realise customers were reacting badly?
- What would 'Y' be expected to do in such situations?

Open-ended questions can also be used to understand your clients' views and opinions on specific issues, e.g:

- How do you feel about...?
- What do you think about...?
- What do you think of the idea that...?
- What are your views on...?
- How important are... would you say?
- What alternatives are available?
- How would you react if...?

Using specific questions

Specific questions allow you to probe for and obtain specific details or facts surrounding an issue. In many cases you want to emerge from an interview with not just opinions but also lots of hard facts. Specific questions help get the details. Use them to follow up on open-ended questions. Some examples are:

- When exactly did that situation first arise?
- Who is responsible for or owns that process?
- When did the breakdown first happen?
- Why did the operator report the incident to you first?

- What were the exact circumstances involved?
- What was the agreed conclusion to those discussions?
- What was the percentage increase at that time?
- How was the report presented to the management?
- Did anyone query the specification the first time it was announced?

Linking questions

The link question is a variation of the open-ended question. It acts as a bridge and allows you to make a transition from one question to another, thus promoting a smooth interview flow. Examples of link questions include:

- You mentioned just now that..., how did this affect...?
- We've just discussed..., could we now have a look at another element of the system problem...?
- How does that issue relate to the point you raised earlier concerning the financing problems...?
- Is there a relationship between the quality and level of training being given?
- As you finished talking about product x it brings to mind some questions I have that relate to product y. How strong a product is that?

Exploring and validating alternative approaches

During certain interviews and, more particularly, during the later stages of a project you may need to begin validating certain hypotheses, strategies or actions. Using the following questions can help you obtain reactions from interested parties or clients. The skill is to suggest the idea or proposition but not sound as though you have already reached a conclusion, as this may put your client off from giving a clear and unbiased answer. You want your client to give you a straightforward reaction to the proposition or proposal.

- Perhaps we could do it another way – such as...?
- Is this the only option available? – What about the xy approach? Would that work?
- What about taking a radically different approach such as...?
- Can we look at it this way...How about integrating all the activities together?
- Next time could we complete the job using...?
- What if your competitors did the opposite and started pursuing the idea – would that suggest it could be made to work?
- I am told that with sufficient resources the process can produce those results – what are your thoughts?

Providing non-verbal encouragement during interviews

Non-verbal encouragement involves you in making noises such as: ‘Ah?’, ‘Oh?’, ‘Uhh?’, ‘Hmm?’ as your client talks. This is a rapport building technique that lets your client know that you are actively listening and that you would like to hear more. Verbal acknowledgements are indications of attention and when combined with appropriate facial expressions (smiles, raised eyebrows, etc.) they encourage your client to talk further.

Similarly, you can also show empathy to your client by the careful use of body posture, facial expressions and eye contact. Leaning forward and demonstrating expressions of interest promotes increased dialogue. However, be careful not to overplay these techniques as some clients may find them off-putting or even manipulative.

Using supportive statements

Supportive statements involve phrases such as: ‘I see...?’, ‘And then what happened...?’, ‘That’s interesting...’ ‘Could you say a little bit more about that, it sounds very relevant.’

Supportive statements produce the same results as non-verbal encouragement – an extended answer from your client that reduces the need for a set of further detailed questions. The aim in using supportive statements is to lead your client into providing as much information and detail as possible with the least amount of spoken comment from you.

Checking your facts and asking for specific information

Throughout an assignment and during any interview you will need to establish specific facts or obtain key information. This requires a more direct questioning approach but be careful to ensure that you do not sound hostile towards people. The directness of the question can sometimes make this difficult. So when thinking about such questions consider your voice tone, the sensitivity of the question and the timing of it. A too heavy handed approach and you may sound like an interrogator.

The following types of question illustrate the approach:

- Where did that information come from?
- Can you confirm those figures?
- Can you confirm that you do actually report to the Operations Director?
- I have been shown a separate set of figures on... can you confirm their accuracy?
- So what is the current system's availability?
- Can you verify this data?

Simply by changing the tone of your voice you can significantly change the way these questions might be interpreted. So be careful and think how the client might react. Avoid being the proverbial bull in a china shop! A simple 'please' or 'would it be possible' can help to soften the blunt sounding nature of some of these questions.

Showing empathy with your client

At certain times you will need to demonstrate empathy with your client. This can be particularly important when your client is discussing sensitive issues and feeling vulnerable about relating particular details. The following statements can help you to get through these difficult areas of an interview:

- You are really concerned about this, aren't you?
- I can see this has caused you a great deal of concern.
- It is pretty obvious from what you have said, why you were annoyed...
- I can understand how you must have felt about the situation.
- That must have been a really difficult situation to deal with.

In other situations you may need to offer some kind of support or assistance to your client in order to engage their continued support and interest. In which case the following statements can be helpful:

- Yes, it is irritating, but let me see if I can help...
- You are quite right to be angry, but I can suggest some ideas for resolving the issue...
- There is every reason to feel upset, but have you thought about...
- Can you tell me the details, I may be able to...

Using summaries

Use summaries regularly throughout any interview. They allow you to check your understanding of any facts that you have been given and to clarify your client's thoughts on important issues. Summary statements also provide you with another method of achieving a smooth change of direction from one topic to another during an interview

Summary questions prevent your client drifting from your interview agenda and allow you to regain control without an abrupt interruption. To that extent they are very helpful in controlling talkative clients.

Summary statements involve phrases such as:

- As I have understood the situation what you are saying is that...
- So what you're saying is... Is that correct?
- If I have understood you correctly... Now could we move on to discuss...
- So, to summarise you are saying that more work will be required to get the project back on track.

Dealing with mistakes

You must expect to make mistakes in some interviews about some issue or information; it is inevitable. The best advice is to openly admit that you have made a mistake to your client, offer an apology and move on. Trying to cover up the issue or avoid it will only make things worse. If this happens try using the following statements:

Sorry that is my mistake!

You're right, I got it wrong I do apologise.

That's quite right, I should have realised... please accept my apologies.

I apologise for the misunderstanding on that issue.

Counter-productive questions

Any question that detracts from the smooth flow of an interview might be called counter-productive. Classic examples include:

Multiple questions

Multiple questions combine several questions into one long statement. The result is to add confusion to the interview process and allow your client to be selective in their answer. Invariably clients fail to address all the questions that you posed.

- So how did you manage to achieve those results without impacting on other parts of the operation and how did your colleagues react?
- Why did you join this part of the organization and how does it compare to the other operation that you worked in, what do you see as the key weaknesses?
- So how long have you worked in this operation and do you like it or are there problems?

Leading questions

Another counter-productive question is the leading question that either invites a particular response or suggests a 'right' answer is required from the client. The leading question is often phrased in the form of an emotional or judgemental tone such as:

- You've got to admit that...?
- Isn't it a fact that...?
- You must concede that...?
- You will surely acknowledge...?
- You're not suggesting that...?
- You don't think that...?

In the case of some of the above examples, you may be expecting the response ‘Yes, of course!’. In others the appropriate answer may be ‘No, of course not’. In either case you are suggesting to the client that you have an answer in mind and that you would like it confirmed. Of course there are some circumstances where this might prove an effective technique to test out someone’s views or opinions. But be careful when applying such a potentially provocative approach.

Critical leading questions

The critical leading question relies on a stronger degree of implied criticism or judgement when posing the question. In some ways it is simply a stronger version of the leading question.

- Surely you can’t believe that..., can you?
- You don’t really think that... do you?
- Surely you’re not suggesting that...?
- You don’t honestly think that..., do you?
- You cannot for one minute, believe your competition would ever do that, do you?

Any response other than a strong rejection of the question might imply a lack of credibility on the part of your client. This form of questioning can therefore frequently appear antagonistic and so also provoke a negative client reaction. This type of question should be avoided unless you feel that your client relationship would not be damaged by such a strong approach.

Using questionnaires to gather information

Whilst interviews allow you to question people in depth on specific issues, questionnaires make it possible for you to assess the views of a large number of people relatively quickly and cheaply. The use of a questionnaire can be a very efficient way to gather information from a wide group of people. Questionnaires also introduce a degree of quantitative data into any analysis. The ability to build a quantitative database of evidence can be vital on projects where people's views and opinions are involved. Arguments supported by statements such as '70% of managers agree' are always useful in influencing clients.

Questionnaires can of course be used on a wide number of projects involving staff and customer surveys, reactions to new IT systems and other organizational improvements. So understanding the steps involved in designing and administering a questionnaire can be extremely useful. Whilst it is possible to develop a questionnaire without too much difficulty there are some rules that you should observe. Figure 14 illustrates a broad overview of the questionnaire design process.

Designing a questionnaire

The questionnaire design process can be divided into a series of nine key steps:

- Step 1:** Identifying your questionnaire themes by interviewing people.
- Step 2:** Arranging initial interviews.
- Step 3:** Preparing key themes for your interviews.
- Step 4:** Conducting interviews.

Step 5: Identifying key issues.

Step 6: Preparing and reviewing questions.

Step 7: Producing your draft questionnaire.

Step 8: Reviewing your draft questionnaire with your client.

Step 9: Conducting the survey with your completed questionnaire.

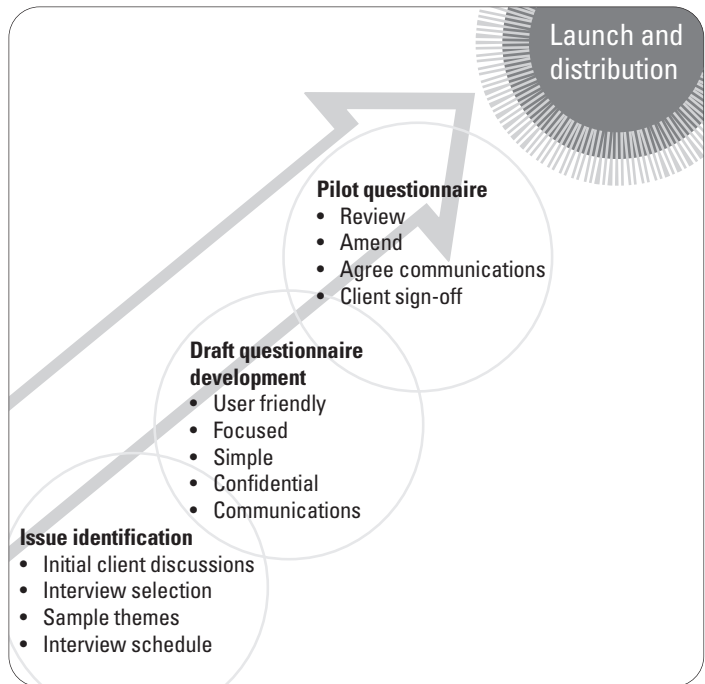


FIGURE 14: GATHERING INFORMATION – THE QUESTIONNAIRE PROCESS

Step 1: Identifying questionnaire themes by interviewing people

The first step in designing any questionnaire is to agree with your client the number of people who will be interviewed so that you can identify the key themes or issues to be included in your survey.

There are no specific rules as to the number of people that you should interview. But you will need to ensure that you include a cross-section of people who will ultimately appear in your final survey. This ensures that any views or issues that reflect different interest groups will emerge in your interviews and so find a place in your final questionnaire design.

One important decision that you will have to make is whether to interview people individually or in groups. Normally, senior managers prefer to be interviewed on their own, but it is also of course possible to interview people effectively in small groups. The group approach saves both time and money although as we have earlier discussed it can sometimes be operationally difficult to manage. You will need to discuss the various practical and operational implications of these approaches with your client before proceeding.

One further issue involves selecting the right people for your interviews. In our experience it is better if you draw up a list of names and then discuss their suitability with your client. Because the people you select may not always be readily available you should agree a clear basis on which you can select alternatives. To save time, it is preferable that you agree with your client that you can approach substitutes for interview without having to constantly refer back to them, unless of course there are operational constraints. You will also need to check that your client provides a representative sample of people so that you get a balanced and realistic set of views and not just those that your client wants you to hear. So, if in doubt, make sure you challenge some of your client's decisions.

Step 2: Arranging initial interviews

You will need to compose and circulate a letter in advance of your interviews explaining the purpose and objectives of the exercise. Your letter should also detail the date, time and location of the interview and identify the topic areas you want to discuss. You should also thank people in advance for agreeing to participate in the exercise and express your wish to minimise any operational disturbance that your visit might bring. You should schedule interviews for between 1.5 and 2 hours depending upon the type of survey you are conducting, and you should be able to hold 4 to 6 interview sessions per day.

Step 3: Preparing key themes for your interviews

Before conducting your interviews, you will need to draw up a list of possible topics and issues for discussion. You will have already discussed and agreed these with your client in advance of any interview programme. As we stated in our interview section, this list of themes should only be used as an outline and prompt, rather than as a detailed check-list to be followed rigorously. It will then help provide a focus and structure to your interviews and ensure a smooth flow.

Step 4: Conducting interviews

During this stage you try to keep on schedule and hope that you do not experience any last minute cancellations. You will also need to maintain your discipline in recording information during the interviews. Any spare time between interviews should be used writing up your interview notes and planning ahead.

Step 5: Identifying key issues

From your interview notes, you must then develop a summary of the issues raised by people. You need to document the location, department or function of the people involved and a short paragraph describing the various issues raised. In lots of cases you will have confirmed the issues already identified during your earlier client discussions. You will however need to review these issues with your client when preparing the final questionnaire as the chances are new issues will have emerged. For example, you may have identified from your interviews three recurring themes such as pay and rewards, staff moral and the restructuring plan. When you come to review these issues with your client you may find that only two of these issues need to be dealt with in the survey as the other will be the subject of a separate review. The end result is that you would have two key issues from which to begin developing your questionnaire. Your next action is to begin to shape your questionnaire content by preparing a set of questions for each theme.

Step 6: Preparing and reviewing questions

The following is a check-list that will help you prepare a set of questions. The most effective approach is to:

- Prepare questions for each issue that was raised.
- Add additional questions based on any other research you may have conducted.
- Brainstorm as many other relevant questions as you can.
- Refine your list, deleting questions that appear irrelevant, repetitive or redundant. Re-word others as appropriate. It is often necessary to draft questions three or four times before arriving at a final draft questionnaire.

- Check that you have the right balance of negative and positive questions.
- Make sure the questions are understandable. Keep them simple and clear.
- Make sure people have the necessary knowledge or experience to answer the questions accurately.

ASK SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

General questions should not be used when specific answers are required. For example:

‘Are you satisfied with the IT Help Desk response?’

This is not a good question if what you really want to find out is how quickly the IT Help Desk responds when a phone call is made. So a better question to ask would be:

‘Does the IT Help Desk pick up phone calls in less than 3 rings?’

AVOID AMBIGUOUS QUESTIONS

Ambiguous questions allow people the opportunity to provide different interpretations to the same question, and so produce meaningless results.

For example:

‘Do you often work overtime because of lack of administrative support?’

If the answer to this question was ‘No’, then what does it actually mean?

‘No, I do not often work overtime’

or

‘No, I do not lack administrative support’

You can see that questions like this leave you open to criticism at the feedback stage. So be clear about what it is you are trying to measure or assess.

USE PRECISE WORDING

Words such as 'fairly', 'generally', 'often', 'many' and 'appropriate' should be avoided as you will then tend to generate inconsistent responses from different people. What is 'fairly good support' for one person is poor support to another.

AVOID LEADING QUESTIONS

Questions should be presented in a neutral way so as to prevent the manipulation of a desired response. An example of a leading question is:

'Do you feel your hard work is appreciated?'

The way to avoid the inherent bias that this type of question can produce is to introduce a number of questions around the central theme of reward that can then be collectively analysed. For example:

'On average, I work more than 40 hours each week'

'My salary is below the national average for the job I do'

'My manager gives me praise when I do a good job'

Leading questions can also be caused by a failure to state alternatives. For example:

'Do you prefer working for a manager of your own sex?'

instead of:

'Would you rather work for a man or a woman, or doesn't it matter?'

KEEP QUESTIONS SHORT

Long questions should be kept to a minimum as they reduce the amount of time people need to spend completing the questionnaire. This reduces any sense of irritation or possible misunderstanding on the part of the person completing the document.

CAREFUL PHRASING

Never ask a question that will put someone on the defensive or make them feel in the wrong. Questions that people find rude or inconsiderate may not only affect their reply, but may also affect their response to the survey as a whole. Also, always remember to avoid jargon and abbreviations unless it is clear that people understand what they mean.

Step 7: Producing your draft questionnaire

Having prepared your questions you will then need to begin the process of structuring your questionnaire format and the first key issue to address is the response scale that you will use.

RESPONSE FORMAT – LIKERT SCALE

The most favoured format to use for your questionnaire response is the Likert Scale see figure 15 overleaf. This involves asking someone whether they agree or disagree with a statement by indicating on a scale their strength of agreement or disagreement. There are usually five basic responses:

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Uncertain/No Opinion/Don't Know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

There should be an equal number of alternating positive and negative worded questions in your questionnaire so as to avoid any potential bias. The advantage of a Likert Scale is that it measures the strength of an attitude or belief whilst at the same time being easy for people to complete.

Characteristics of the HR Function	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1 Seeks involvement with line managers in formulating business strategy and policy and in the planning process	1	2	3	4	5
2 Develops and implements coherent and integrated HR policies in support of business plans	1	2	3	4	5
3 Creates and conveys a clear view of HR aims and objectives, and the steps necessary to achieve them	1	2	3	4	5
4 Learns about activities/processes that form the basis of the internal customers business; uses this to improve service delivery	1	2	3	4	5
5 Builds effective working relationships with internal customers characterised by trust and respect	1	2	3	4	5
6 Adapts policies, activities and behaviour to the needs of different business units and different situations	1	2	3	4	5
7 Understands those factors which influence business performance	1	2	3	4	5

FIGURE 15: AN EXAMPLE OF THE LIKERT SCALE ON A QUESTIONNAIRE

RESPONSE FORMAT – FREE FORM REPLIES

Free form replies are open-ended questions that allow people to write what they want on a subject. You should generally avoid structuring the questionnaire so that a free form reply is needed to answer each question. This is because:

- A significant amount of time is needed by people to answer these questions and it is likely this time and effort will reduce the overall response rate to your questionnaire. People will simply get fed up writing or not bother at all.

- Those who write the most will inevitably exert more influence on the results.
- Collecting and analysing the responses is very time consuming.
- There are many difficulties in analysing and presenting the replies in a structured and systematic way as people will tend to write what they want and you end up with lots of diverse information which is difficult to present back to your client.

SECTION AT THE END

However, free form replies can yield useful information. So for many surveys, it may be a good idea to include a section at the end of your questionnaire that invites people to add any comments without presenting a specific question for them to answer. This has the advantage of allowing people to raise issues that they feel strongly about and which have not been covered by the questionnaire. We have included this type of approach in our organizational survey in the toolkit chapter at the end of this book. You will see that it combines both the free form reply approach with a Likert scale.

However, analysis of such data should be treated with caution. It is likely that only a relatively small proportion of people will make additional comments and these will not necessarily be representative of the whole group of people being surveyed.

Nevertheless, you will generate some useful comments that you may find valuable in your client feedback stage.

USING CHECKLIST RESPONSES

Checklist responses are a good method to use where you need to collect responses to a question other than agreement or disagreement. An example of a checklist format is:

'I work the following hours on my computer each day:'

- Less than 1 hour ☐
- 1-3 hours ☐
- More than 3 hours ☐

NUMBERS OF QUESTIONS

Your questionnaire should be no longer than is absolutely necessary to achieve its purpose. The temptation in questionnaire design is always to ask too many questions. Lengthy questionnaires are unlikely to be answered accurately or completely. In many situations an overly complex questionnaire will result in a low response rate. So keep things short and brief.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (PERSONAL DETAILS)

To analyse peoples' responses and identify different views without breaking confidentiality, it is normal on the front of your questionnaire, to ask people to categorise themselves according to their organization grade, location, department or any other item that you may have agreed with your client. You do however need to be careful that too detailed a breakdown will lead people to suspect that their individual responses can be identified and this might affect their replies.

COMPLETION TIME AND RETURN

The amount of time someone should take to complete your questionnaire should be explained on the first page of the questionnaire as part of your general instructions. People should not be asked to complete a questionnaire in too short a period of time as this may mean they will rush and not give accurate responses.

With regard to returning the questionnaire after completion you should set on average a target of ten working days from distribution to return. This should provide people with sufficient time and also give you time to manage the logistics surrounding the exercise. Avoid periods longer than ten days as this indicates a lack of urgency and priority in people's minds and will result in a weaker response rate.

QUESTIONNAIRE INSTRUCTIONS

You must provide clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. Use bold print and block capitals to emphasise key points and:

- Indicate how all the questions should be answered, for example, by circling, crossing or ticking the answers.
- Show what each category of response means, for example, 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree.
- Tell people how to correct mistakes in their answers.
- Indicate the amount of time it should take to complete the questionnaire.
- Remind people to complete the Personal Details section and check that they have answered all the questions before returning the questionnaire.
- Clearly state who they should return the questionnaire to and by what date.

COVERING LETTER

Before finalising the content of your draft questionnaire you should prepare a letter to accompany it. This should contain the following information:

- The purpose of the questionnaire.
- Who has commissioned it.
- Why the individual has been selected to complete the questionnaire.
- The confidentiality agreements surrounding the results.
- Explain that there are no right or wrong answers.
- Explain what the next steps are.
- Thank people in advance for their co-operation.

Ideally, this letter should be signed off by the client or the lead project consultant. In projects where there is a lot of sensitivity it may be better for the consultant to sign it as it emphasises the issue of independence. In less sensitive circumstances it is a good idea to get the client to sign the letter as it demonstrates their commitment to the exercise.

QUESTIONNAIRE ADMINISTRATION

Do not under-estimate the amount of work needed to process the questionnaires when they are returned. Of course when dealing with numbers in excess of thirty you should use information technology to process the results. This will involve the answers from each questionnaire being typed (or preferably scanned where very large numbers are involved) into a computer using a suitable software package that will ultimately process the data and produce meaningful information. There are a few software packages that are designed to process questionnaires, however, many people use their favourite spreadsheet, database or statistical package. If you are not comfortable in dealing with this part of the process

make sure you get the right people with the right skills to complete your data analysis. It is not an overly complex process but it does need to be carried out in a systematic manner and have lots of cross-checks built into the process to ensure the validity of the data.

Step 8: Reviewing your draft questionnaire with your client

Once you have reviewed your draft questionnaire with your client and agreed to the content and all the administrative arrangements surrounding the process, you then need to test it on a small number of between ten and twenty people to check that it is understandable. These people should be broadly representative of your final survey population. In selecting people for this process try to select those who will be conscientious and so inclined to comment and add value to the final questionnaire design.

In conducting this review ask the people involved to make a note of any difficult questions or confusing areas in the draft questionnaire. The feedback you will then receive will almost inevitably reveal flaws and problems with specific questions. The most common faults that are likely to emerge during this process are:

- Using technical or organization jargon that is not understood by people.
- Not using language or terminology that is familiar to people.
- Including repetitive questions.
- Inappropriate questions. For example, you will lose credibility if you ask a person who does not supervise others a question on how they get on with their staff.

- Assuming that people have a complete understanding of the organization. For example, employees may not understand the phrase 'The Operational Board'.

Of course not all the points raised may lead to changes but you will almost invariably need to change some aspects of the questionnaire.

Step 9: Conducting the survey with your finalised questionnaire

Once all the points that have been raised in your pilot questionnaire have been noted and reviewed, your client should be given the opportunity to add, change or remove any questions. You are now ready to send out your final questionnaire together with an accompanying letter.

You must make sure that all the administrative arrangements are in place and that the right people have been briefed about the exercise. The aim is to distribute your questionnaires as quickly as possible and to then obtain as many completed replies as fast as possible, and certainly within your project timescales so that you can then begin your analysis phase.

On large-scale surveys involving many hundreds of people you may want to set up some telephone help-lines to deal with any queries that people might have about the survey. But if you have planned everything out and communicated clearly there should be no major problems.

In presenting your survey feedback you should use graphical outputs of the type that can easily be generated by today's software packages. Figure 16 provides a simple example.

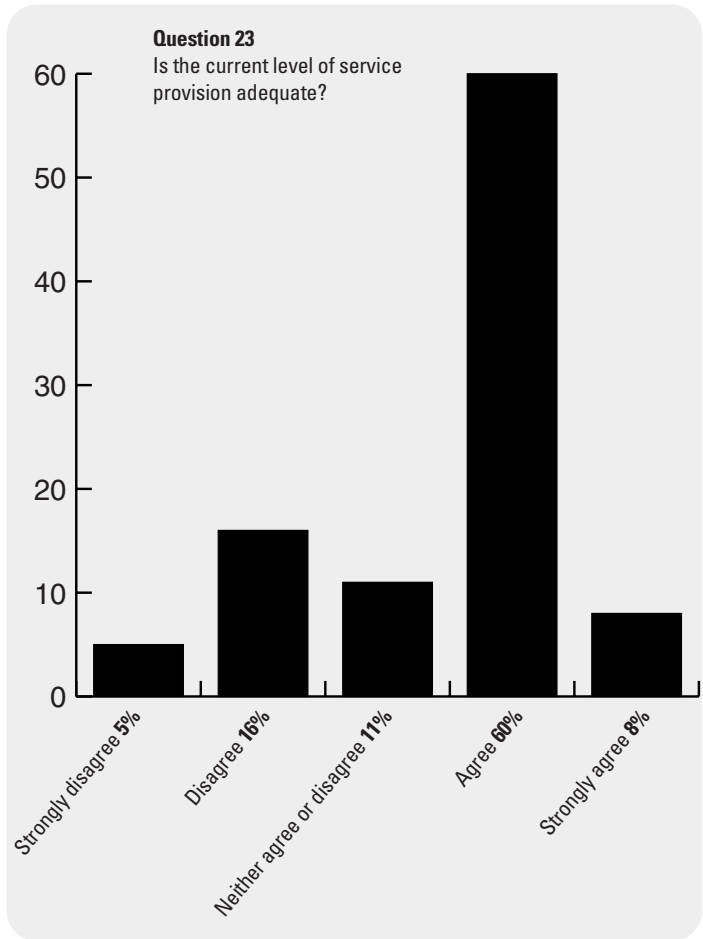


FIGURE 16: SURVEY FEEDBACK DISPLAYED GRAPHICALLY

The benefit of outputs like the one illustrated is that they immediately tell the story to clients and so are highly effective at communicating responses and indicating trends. Whilst you would need to back them up with a written report and detailed statistical data the power of a graphical presentation is so much greater than the written word.

Process mapping

Process mapping has a long tradition in the systems world but also developed wider interest during the 1990s amid the surge in business process re-engineering. Re-engineering projects reviewed core business processes with a view to identifying non-value added activities in organization processes.

Figure 17 illustrates some of the classic examples of non-valued added activity.

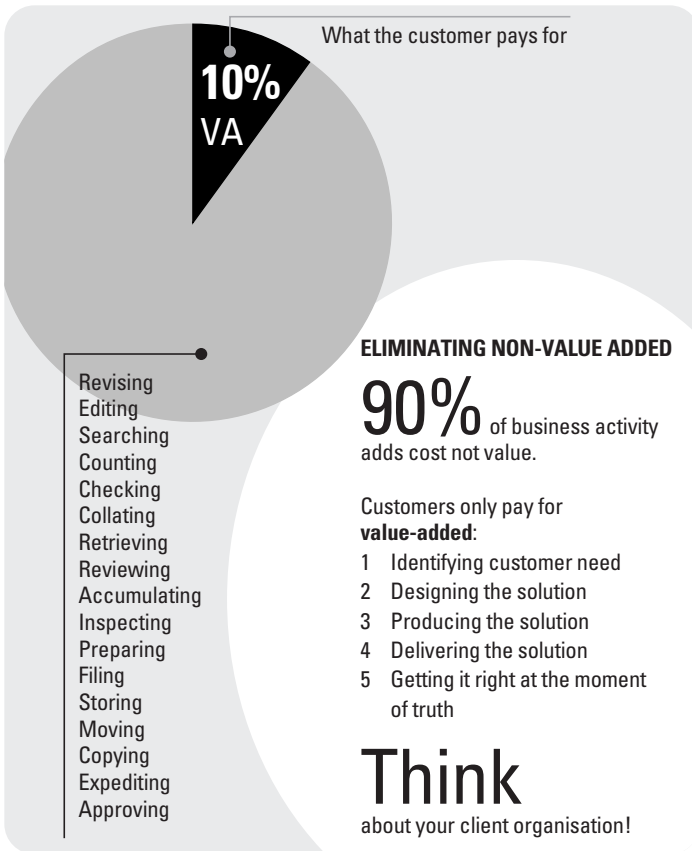


FIGURE 17: PROCESS THINKING AND VALUE ADDED

Whilst not a new concept, process mapping can be a very powerful way to build up a clear picture of how certain organizational processes work. To that extent it is a very useful method of collecting and gathering information about existing processes and work approaches. It is particularly relevant in re-organization and information technology projects that require a detailed understanding of existing operations.

At the heart of the process mapping technique is the use of classic systems tools to produce detailed process flow diagrams. Figure 18 highlights some of the more readily used symbols and illustrates how they can be used to describe the various elements of a work process.

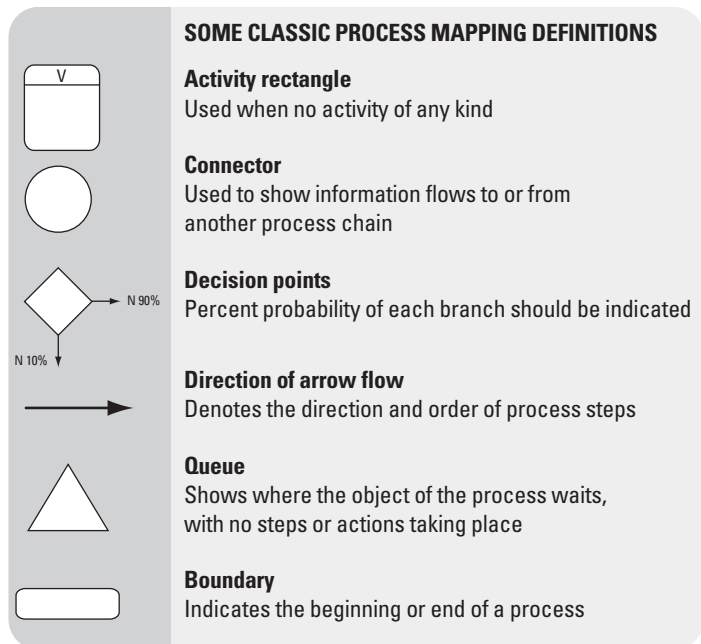


FIGURE 18: THE PROCESS TOOLKIT

The aim in using these symbols is to build up a clear picture as to the precise steps or actions involved in a specific process such as customer ordering or distribution. Process mapping can be used to build up an understanding of almost any part of an organization. As an approach it can generate powerful insights into the amount of time a process takes and how much value added time is involved. Indeed, once you start using these few symbols you will be surprised how easy it is to build up a detailed picture of a process. When applied in a re-engineering context, process mapping aims to assist in the identification and then removal of non-valued added activities so as to produce more efficient and leaner processes.

Figure 19 details how value added activities can be identified using a simple decision tree.

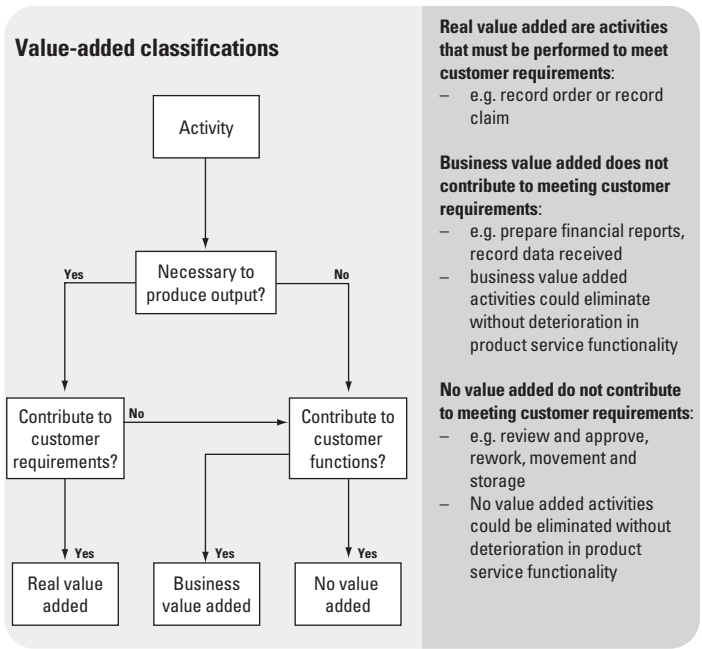


FIGURE 19: HOW TO CLASSIFY VALUE ADDED AND NON-VALUE ADDED

Of course the notion of what actually constitutes a value added process in an organization is often a controversial discussion. Nevertheless, the decision tree can help to pose the right questions for any review that you might be undertaking. Process mapping involves five key stages and begins with a series of interviews:

- 1 Interviewing job or process holders about what they actually do. This involves:
 - Identifying critical or core processes
 - Establishing the key steps and times to perform individual activities
 - Identifying any wider organizational factors that might impact on the performance of the process
- 2 Translate interview information into an initial process map
- 3 Validate your process map with the process owner – check that you have understood everything:
 - Identify value added and non-value added time in the process
 - Confirm the existing process map:
 - Discuss findings with your client
 - Discuss findings with process holders
- 4 Redesign the process to improve the process or remove non-value added activities
- 5 Involve client and process holders

Process mapping builds up a clear and coherent picture of what is actually happening in parts of an organization.

Figures 20 shows the way in which various activities are mapped and then classified to generate a process map.

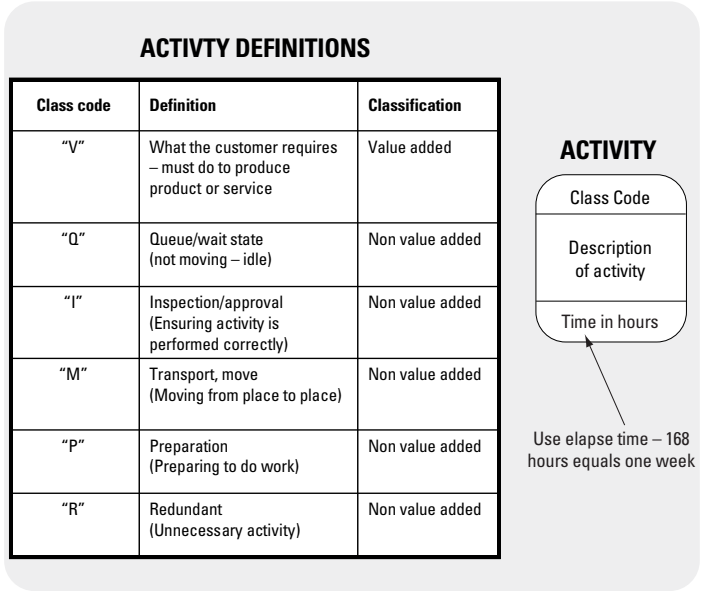


FIGURE 20: WHAT IS DRIVING PERFORMANCE?

The whole approach can help you build up a detailed understanding of processes and Figure 21 illustrates a simple example involving the steps involved in making a decision to go fishing. You can see how the various symbols are used to describe the key steps involved in this process and how significant this type of analysis can be made in reviewing organizations and their core processes.

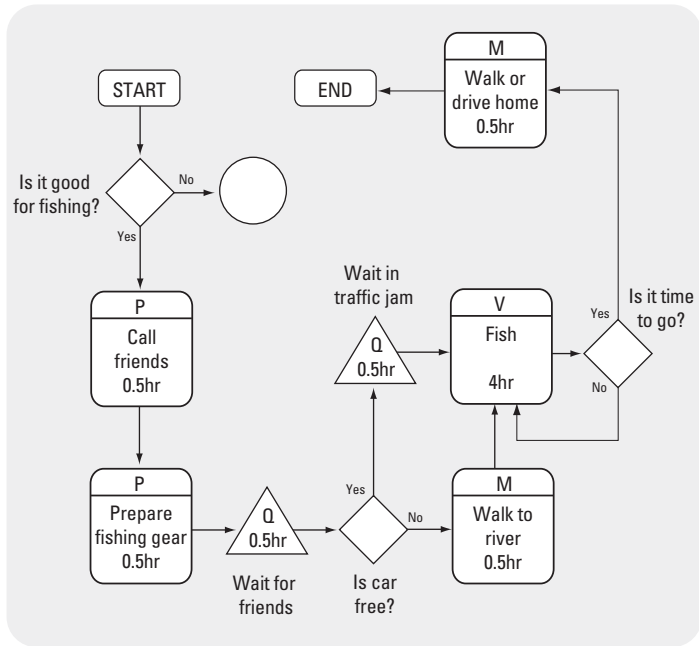


FIGURE 21: THIS IS HOW YOUR PROCESS MAPS SHOULD LOOK

In addition to developing process maps, another key element of the approach involves identifying wider organizational issues that might be impacting on the performance of a process. To obtain this type of information you will need to use lots of the approaches we have identified in our section on interviewing.

Figure 22 highlights some of the wider issues that may have to be considered in any major organization project. We will refer to more of these issues in our chapter involving change management. But it is essential that when undertaking any process review you also identify how the process fits into the wider organization. Processes do not work in isolation and you do need to consider other key organizational factors such as organization structure, rewards, skill levels,

technological capabilities etc. Being able to identify how each process is influenced by such factors is key to any successful re-design initiative.

ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS	Sales order process under review				
	Develop new products	Process sales order	Prepare quotation	Close the contract	Overall impact on time, cost and quality
Barrier or enabler (1 = enabler, 5 = barrier)					
Culture/behaviours					
Organisation					
Processes/workflows					
Job design and responsibilities					
Skills and knowledge requirements					
Motivation/incentives					
Communications					
Operating procedures and policies					
Human resource management					
Technology					
Stakeholders					

FIGURE 22: PROCESS THINKING – WIDER ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS

Whilst business process re-engineering achieved big performance improvements in many organizations, it did in the mid and late 1990’s become the subject of much criticism. Many organizations applied the concepts in an overly simplistic way with the result that it became associated with many crude and brutal cost cutting exercises. The result was often failed projects with very poorly executed implementation strategies. A significant problem was that people failed to see these processes in the bigger organizational context.

This recent history and experience may mean that some people may view process mapping techniques negatively. Care will need to be exercised when selling in such an approach – remember your client may have a bad prior experience. When interviewing people on a process be very sensitive to their concerns about the aims and objectives of your work.

Despite these concerns the benefits that can result from process mapping can be considerable so add it to your toolkit of expertise.

Process analysis questions



Listed below are two sets of questions that you can employ when interviewing job or process holders. One identifies the detailed aspects of any process. The second set identifies any organizational factors that might be impacting on the performance of the process.

Process questions

- What are the inputs that start your process off?
- What are the functions or events that drive your process?
- Who are the suppliers (both internal and external) to your process?
- What are the outcomes or products of your process?
- Who are the ultimate customers of your process?
- What do you do next?
- Why do you then wait until x happens before completing that part of the process?

- Why do you record that information?
- What then happens to that information?
- Why do you have to refer that decision to x?
- Who uses the information you process?
- Can you describe the logical sequence of activities you perform to complete your process?
- How much time does each activity take to complete?
- How much queue (dead) time is there between activities?

Organizational issues questions

- How do your customers react to the responsiveness and quality of the outcomes of your process?
- What performance measures are in place to monitor the results of your process?
- What kinds of things prevent you from achieving better results in the process?
- Are there any other wider organizational issues that you feel need to be resolved to help you process better results?
- What factors annoy you about the way your department operates?
- If you had total freedom to improve the efficiency of your department what specific things would you do?

Understanding and defining your client's problem – being client focused

This stage of the consulting process involves the systematic collection of information in order to understand your client's underlying problem(s) and begin developing possible solutions.

Questions you should ask?

- How much detailed information do you need to collect?
- What information is already available within the organization?
- What other information will you need to collect?
- What research will you need to conduct?
- What methodologies will you need to use to collect information? – interviews, questionnaires, process mapping, observation etc.
- Whose involvement and support will you need?
- What sorts of costs will be involved in terms of time, logistics and finance?
- How will you handle the issue of confidentiality during your information gathering work. What commitments/agreements will you give to your client(s)? What will you say to interviewees? What will you tell them about the next steps?
- How will you present your findings? What report, presentation format will you use and to what sort of client audience will you ultimately present?
- How are people around the organization going to react to the project and to its aims?
- Are there any 'political' issues surrounding this project that you need to be aware of?

Client's perspective of you:

- Do you give me the impression you understand my problem?
- Are you realistic in your methods and approach?
- Do you agree with my analysis?
- Are you focusing on the right issues?
- Are you projecting confidence?
- Are you making me think differently about the problem?
- How long will this data collection process take?
- How disruptive will the work be to my operation and organization?
- Do you provide me with a sense of urgency?
- Are you adding some new light on the problems?
- Are you listening to me and my concerns?

Other statements/questions you might use:

- Can you tell me a little more about...
- You mentioned earlier... can you say more about that
- Are you sure that x is a real problem?
- How do you know that x caused the problem?
- Can you explain...?
- Could you describe what actually happened...?
- Then what took place?
- Did anyone argue against it?
- But you said this has been going on for many years and nothing has happened, why has this been the case?

- How did that happen?
- Could you outline the strengths of the current situations?
- What are the weaknesses of the current situation?
- Are there any other potential risks?
- If you could do one thing to improve the situation what would it be?

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