EXPERT INTERVIEW (with audience)

/ Direct learning conversations with experts /

WHAT IS THE EXPERT INTERVIEW?

The Expert Interview is a participatory question and answer session in which members of the audience take the lead in asking a subject matter expert questions that are oriented towards their needs and interests, within the context of his/her expertise. Instead of the expert giving a presentation on what s/he thinks people want to know, this tool lets participants decide on the questions they consider important. The tool can be used to ‘interview’ up to three experts and can accommodate any number of participants.

REQUIREMENTS:

- Facilitator
- Rapporteur
- Up to 3 guests (subject matter experts)
- Participants (any number)
- Microphones: One per expert, plus 1-2 for participants asking questions
- Open space or room, large enough to accommodate participants
- Chairs (see ‘Set up the room’ below)
- Pin board (optional)
- Flipchart sheets and marker pens (optional)
- Laptop computer (optional)
- LCD projector (optional)
- 60 – 90 minutes

WHEN AND WHY TO USE

The Expert Interview is perfect for sharing knowledge and experiences from a few experts in a dynamic, engaging and participatory way. There are no presentations. Instead, participants are free to ask any relevant questions within the designated topic (based on the particular knowledge of the experts). Experts (who may be academics, practitioners, or both) respond directly and can have conversations with participants.

Spontaneous questions from participants can often elicit more, and more relevant, knowledge from experts than one-way presentations in which the expert tries to anticipate what s/he thinks the audience wants to know. The open layout used in
the Expert Interview helps make it less intimidating, and more conducive to participation, than a panel discussion. The Expert Interview can be used:

- To introduce a topic or theme at the beginning of a workshop/multi-session event.
- As an alternative to a formal podium presentation or keynote with experts.
- To elicit knowledge from resource persons without requiring them to do a lot of preparation.
- To introduce new concepts or potentially ‘hot topics’ that participants may be curious about but have little knowledge of.

The Expert Interview is similar to the Fishbowl. Key differences include that the physical setup for the Expert Interview keeps the experts at the front of the room, and the Expert Interview does not allow experts to leave the discussion and be replaced. The net effect is a greater emphasis, in the Expert Interview, on the contributions of the experts.

The Expert Interview is the face-to-face equivalent of the Online Jam in its Ask Me Anything version (see the article on the Online Jam in this Toolbox for more information).

**HOW TO APPLY**

**Prepare in advance**

1. **Choose experts based on relevance of their knowledge and experiences to the work of your participants, and/or to your desired objectives.** Pick a date and time, confirm the experts’ availability, and brief them on how the session will unfold.

2. **Publicize the session.** Compose a short, compelling message about the event, and include the topic, who the experts are, when and where the session will take place, how to participate (e.g. just show up, or register in advance). Share it as appropriate: via direct email to individuals or mailing lists, broadcast emails, posting it on organizational social networks, putting up notices, etc., all depending on your desired participants. **Ask participants to come prepared with relevant questions.** Then share a reminder a few days before the event.

3. **Set up the room**

   In front of the audience, place up to three chairs on one side (for the experts), and two chairs on the other (for participants with questions) in the shape of an inverted V (see illustration). Ensure that a microphone is available at each chair. The audience is seated facing the experts in a semi-circle or theatre-style, depending on the number of participants and room size. The facilitator starts by standing at the front to open the session, and then remains among the audience, to support the process of asking questions and provide any other needed support.
When you are ready to start

4. Begin by giving a brief explanation of how the session will be run. Ensure that participants understand their active role in group learning: The participants themselves are responsible for eliciting stories and experiences from the experts. Encourage them to ask about relevant issues and challenges that the experts have grappled with in getting their jobs done, how they created effective solutions, etc.

5. Introduce each of the experts: Give their names, identify their roles/positions, and summarize their expertise and its relevance to the audience. This will help participants understand the scope for discussion and allow them to formulate relevant questions. Use a flipchart, or project a PowerPoint slide, to highlight key points that can provide further context and spark the discussion.

6. Invite participants with questions – first come, first served – to seat themselves on one of the two empty chairs available. Instruct them to keep their questions to the point, and to avoid statements and lengthy preambles. Once their question has been asked and answered, they should vacate the seat so that someone else with a question can sit and ask it. Up to two participants can sit at the front; one will be asking a question or listening to a response, and the other is next up. Ask other participants with questions to wait nearby so they can quickly take their turn: This reduces unnecessary pauses between questions.

7. As each question is being answered, the rapporteur captures the main points in order to document the session and to help participants keep track. Rapporteurs can write on colour-coded cards that are pinned onto a pin board, or they can take notes on a computer and project them onto a large screen (the latter is useful for large audiences).

8. The Q&A continues for the stipulated time or until the questions run out. Allow up to 45 minutes of Q&A for a session with one expert, or 80 minutes for three, plus time for participant briefing and expert introductions. Avoid longer sessions: Both the audience and the experts will likely become restless or tired.

9. Close the session by thanking the experts and summarizing the key messages from the session.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Don’t limit your choice of experts to academics: An expert is anyone with relevant experience and insights from theory and practice concerning a relevant topic, or even a person who has just completed a really interesting/important project or assignment.
**Expert Interview**

- Don’t use more than 3 experts. Otherwise the Q&A may become tediously long, and the session will resemble an ordinary panel discussion.

- Explain the scope of the Expert Interview clearly to ensure that the questions asked are relevant to the theme and to the experts’ knowledge.

- Allow flexibility in the questions asked. Encourage a wide range so that the session caters to participant interests.

- As facilitator, you should be prepared to ask one or two questions at the start of the session, if needed to get the ball rolling.

**VARIATIONS**

- **5-minute introductory talk:** The expert is given 5 minutes at the beginning of the session to introduce their area of work or to present a new topic/idea/finding. No slides are allowed. This gives participants some context in which they can ask questions. The talk is followed by the participant Q&A process, as above.

- **Temporary expert:** One extra chair is added to the experts’ side; if there are two experts, there will be three chairs. If a question is asked and a participant has considerable relevant knowledge or experience (at their own discretion), they may take the empty seat and assume the role of ‘temporary expert’ by responding to the question. Afterwards they vacate the seat.

**REFERENCES**


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