

Workshop: Are Your Support Programs for Service Members Effective?



Common Data Collection Methods

Method	When to Use	Advantages	Disadvantages
Survey	You want information directly from a defined group of people to get a general idea of a situation, to generalize about a population or to get a total count of a particular characteristic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Many standardized instruments available ■ Can be anonymous ■ Allows a large sample ■ Standardized responses easy to analyze ■ Able to obtain a large amount of data quickly ■ Relatively low cost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sample may not be representative ■ May have low return rate ■ Wording can bias responses ■ Closed-ended or brief responses may not provide the whole story ■ Not suited for all people—e.g. those with low reading level
Interview	You want to understand impressions and experiences in more detail and be able to expand or clarify responses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Often better response rate than surveys ■ Allows flexibility in questions/probes ■ Allows more in-depth information to be gathered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Time consuming ■ Requires skilled interviewer ■ Less anonymity for respondent ■ Qualitative data more difficult to analyze
Focus Group	You want to collect in-depth information from a group of people about their experiences and perceptions related to a specific issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Collect multiple peoples' input in one session ■ Allows in-depth discussion ■ Group interaction can produce greater insight ■ Can be conducted in short time frame ■ Can be relatively inexpensive compared to interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Requires skilled facilitator ■ Limited number of questions can be asked ■ Group setting may inhibit or influence opinions ■ Data can be difficult to analyze ■ Not appropriate for all topics or populations
Document Review	Program documents or literature are available and can provide insight into the program or the evaluation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Data already exist ■ Does not interrupt the program ■ Little or no burden on others ■ Can provide historical or comparison data ■ Introduces little bias 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Time consuming ■ Data limited to what exists and is available ■ Data may be incomplete ■ Requires clearly defining the data you're seeking
Observation	You want to learn how the program actually operates—its processes and activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Allows you to learn about the program as it is occurring ■ Can reveal unanticipated information of value ■ Flexible in the course of collecting data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Time consuming ■ Having an observer can alter events ■ Difficult to observe multiple processes simultaneously ■ Can be difficult to interpret observed behaviors