Step Two | Collect Your Data — *Qualitative Methods*

Like quantitative methods, interviewing requires a sampling plan. However, random sampling usually is not recommended for interviewing projects because the numbers of interviewees are so small. Instead, most evaluators use purposeful sampling (sometimes called *purposive* sampling), in which you choose participants that you are sure can answer your questions thoroughly and accurately.

There are a number of approaches to purposeful sampling and use of more than one approach is highly recommended. The following are some examples described by Patton [7]:

- You may want interviewees who represent the "typical" user or participant, such as the typical health information consumer or typical health care provider in your community.
- To illuminate the potential of your project, you may decide to interview people who have made the most out of the training you have offered.
- To explore challenges to your strategies and activities, you might choose to interview those who did not seem to get as much from the project or chose not to participate in outreach activities.
- You may decide to sample for diversity, such as interviewing representatives from all of the different stakeholder groups in the project.
- You might set criteria for choosing interviewees, such as participants that completed 3 of 4 training sessions.
- If you have difficulty identifying potential interviewees, you can use a snowball or chain approach where you ask knowledgeable people to recommend other potential interviewees.

There *are* occasions where random sampling of interviewees is warranted. In some cases, you will increase credibility of your results if you can demonstrate that you chose participants without knowing in advance how they would respond to your questions. In some circumstances, this is an important consideration. However, you must realize that a random sample generated for qualitative evaluation projects is too small to generalize to a larger group. It only shows that you used a sampling approach that would rule out biases in choosing interviewees. [7]

Convenience samples, in which participants are chosen simply because they are readily accessible, should be avoided except when piloting survey methods or conducting preliminary research. The typical "person-on-the-street" interviews you sometimes see on the evening news is an example of a convenience sample. This approach is fast and low-cost, but the people who agree to participate may not represent those who can provide the most or best information about the outreach project.

A common question asked by outreach teams is "How many interviews do we need to conduct?" That question can be answered in advance for quantitative procedures, but not for qualitative methods. The usual suggestion is that you continue to interview until you stop hearing new information. However, resource limitations usually require that you have some boundaries for conducting interviews. Therefore, your sampling design should meet the following criteria:

- You should be able to articulate for yourself and stakeholders the rationale for why you have selected the interviewees in your sample.
- Your list of interviewees should be adequate in number and diversity to provide a substantial amount of useful information about your evaluation questions.
- The number and diversity of your interviewees should be credible to the project's stakeholders.

As you plan, always be prepared to add a few interviews in case you find information that should be pursued further. Your interviews may uncover some exciting, unexpected responses that you will want to explore.

The ethics of interviewing require that you provide introductory information to help the interviewee decide whether or not to participate. You can provide this information in writing, but you must be sure the person reads and understands it before you begin the interview. If your project must be reviewed by an institutional review board, you must follow its guidelines for providing informed consent to interviewees. However, with or without institutional review, you should provide the following information to your interviewees:

- The purpose of the interview and why their participation is important;
- How their responses will be reported and to whom;
- How you plan to protect the interviewee's confidentiality;
- The risks and benefits of participation;
- The voluntary nature of their participation and their right to refuse to answer questions or withdraw from the interview at any time.

If you want to record the interview, explain what will happen to the recording (e.g., who else will hear it, how it will be discarded). Then gain permission from the interviewee to proceed with the recording.

Step Three talks about summarizing and analyzing your interview data. In preparation for this step, you should take reflective notes about what you heard. These notes differ from the notes you take during the interview to describe what the participant is saying. Reflective notes are taken shortly after the interview (preferably within 24 hours) and include your commentary on the interaction. Miles and Huberman [8] suggest these memos should take from a few minutes to a half hour. Some of the issues you might include in reflective notes are the following:

- What do you think were the most important points made by the interviewee? Why do you consider these important? (E.g., the respondent talked about the topic several times or no other interviewee mentioned these points.)
- How did the information you got in this interview corroborate other interviews?
- What new things did you learn? Were there any contradictions between this interview and others?
- Are you starting to see some themes emerging that are common to the interviews?
- Be sure to add descriptive information about the encounter: time, date, place, informant.
- Start to generate a list of codes with each reflective note and write the codes somewhere in the margins or in the corner of your memo.

Miles and Huberman [8] also offer other suggestions for these reflective notes:

- Was there any underlying "meaning" in what the informant was saying to you?
- What are your personal reactions to things said by this informant?
- Do you have any doubts about what the informant said (e.g., was the informant not sure how open he or she could be with you)?
- Do you have any doubts about the quality of the information from other informants after talking with this person?
- Do you think you should reconsider how you are asking your interview questions?
- Are there other issues you should pursue in future interviews?
- Did something in this interview elaborate or explain a question you had about the information you are collecting?
- Can you see connections or contradictions between what you heard in this interview and findings from other data (such as surveys, interviews with people at other levels of the organization, etc.)?

These notes may include things like themes that seem to be emerging, questions that have arisen during a specific interview, or conclusions you may want to confirm at another interview. This practice will make Step Three a little less overwhelming.