

Empathy Interviewing

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RESOURCE	Guide

What is an Empathy Interview

Empathy interviews are open-ended conversations meant to elicit storytelling and insight about specific experiences you seek to learn more about in order to fix a problem. By using a human-centered approach to understanding the feelings and experiences of others, empathy interviews gather insights that otherwise might not be obvious or shared with you. These insights can then be used to identify the issues or barriers and create potential solutions by hearing from the one directly impacted and not making assumptions. Though they are called 'interviews', the experience should be very welcoming where the goal is to understand the user and learn about their experience.

Why conduct Empathy Interviews

Empathy interviews...

- allow you to gather broad and detailed qualitative information on how working learners and supervisors are experiencing our current student employment system
- create space for users to speak about what is important to them
- lead to more innovative, human-centered solutions that might not be obvious
- are about getting deeper and going beyond the typical questions
- encourage users to share their stories and experiences in their own words to elicit insights about their needs, desires, values, concerns, and perspectives
- can support in identifying issues that need to be addressed and discover the root causes of the problem from the direct experience of the ones facing the problem

How to carry out Empathy Interviews

Before the Interview:

1. **Consider your empathy interviewing team.** This will likely be the members of your campus team or design sprint participants. Take time to reflect on the interviewing team's positionality and what power and privilege will be brought into the interview. Practice the interview process with your team members prior to the interview with your users/audience.
2. **Identify the issue to investigate** and seek solutions for. This may be a problem, gap, barrier, or concern you wish to understand better. What is the challenge area you need to learn more about? This is your 'why'.

3. **Research and identify your user audience** to be interviewed. Who might be helpful to interview about their experiences based on the issue you are investigating? Who do you need to talk to in order to understand the challenge? Think about what perspectives are important to hear from.
4. **Brainstorm questions** to ask. Prepare four to eight open-ended, story-based questions. Consider questions found in the Interview Bank Questions section or create your own to ensure they help you understand what makes your problem area challenging.
5. **Develop a plan** for who you will interview, when is best to interview them, where the interview will take place, and how you will conduct the interview. It is also important to consider who will interview and who will take notes if carrying out your interviews in pairs.
6. **Agree upon a protocol** with your team outlining your why in carrying out the interviews, how you will use the data, the confidentiality of the responses, and the voluntary nature of the interview.

During the Interview:

1. Introduce yourself and describe why you are conducting the interview
2. Explain how you will use the data
3. Share your confidentiality agreement
4. State that the interview and each question asked is voluntary

Do's and Don'ts of Empathy Interviewing	
Do's	Don'ts
Conduct interviews as 1:1 or in a small group	Speak more than the one you are interviewing and not listen
Use open-minded, neutral questions about specific experiences	Fill pauses and silence
Have a conversational approach with an emphasis on listening	Focus on the script so much you miss what is being shared
Follow tangents and observe emotions and passions	Come into the interview with bias or preconceived notions of the problem
Assume a 'beginner's mindset' by being curious and taking a learner stance	Use acronyms and jargon in your questions
Observe body language, non-verbal cues, and facial expressions	Ask limited, binary or closed questions
Provide follow-up prompts such as "Tell me more", "Why", "How did you feel", etc.	Ask for solutions, instead ask for stories
Start with the positive	Carry out an interview without first practicing with your design team
Stay neutral	Be distracted during the interview
Consider power dynamics at play and plan your interviews and partners accordingly	Challenge, correct, or interrupt

Interview Question Bank

- Tell me about a time when ____.
- Tell me about the last time you ____.
- What are the best/worst experiences with ____?
- Can you share a story that would help me understand more about ____?
- Tell me about a time you felt successful with ____.
 - Why do you think you were successful?
- Tell me about a time when ____ was hard.
 - Why was it hard?
 - How did it feel?
 - What would have helped?
 - What did you do?
 - What do you wish happened?
- How do you feel about ____?
- What makes you frustrated about ____?
- What do you like the most/least about ____?
- What do you think are the biggest reasons for why ____ happens/doesn't happen?
 - What makes you think that?
- What do you wish others knew about ____?
- What advice would you give another student/employee/student/person about ____?
- What advice would you give me about ____?
- If you could describe how you feel about ____ in one word, what is it?

Next Steps after the Empathy Interview

After carrying out an empathy interview, analyze what you learned by listing all insights from the empathy interview and any quotes from the user. This data can then be used in your empathy mapping process when taking the interview notes and qualitative data and relating it to:

- Who your user was
- What your user felt
- What your user thought
- What your user said
- What your user did
- What their goals are
- What their points of pain are
- What their points of gain are

It is important to consider what you heard and what you are learning that contributes to the problem, from your user's perspective. Consider how you carried out the interview and how well you followed your protocol. Were there questions that led to a lot of insight? Were there questions you wished you would have asked that were not on your original protocol? Use this reflection to inform your next interviews and how you interpret the results.

Helpful Additional Resources

[Techniques for Empathy Interviews in Design Thinking](#)

[How to Conduct Empathy Interviews](#)