

Are you recording this? – the case for audio recording of interviews

By Bryan Cook

Interviewing is a skill utilized across a variety of professional disciplines including health care, human resources, litigation, law enforcement and scientific research. While the exact nature of those fields varies, the key purpose of any interview remains the same -- to extract accurate and reliable information about a particular subject matter. This is usually done by the interviewer asking the interviewee a specific set of questions, but the method for capturing the responses varies widely depending on context, formality, policy, legislation and accepted practice. Traditionally, interviewers have physically written / typed the responses provided. However, electronic recording is increasingly being utilized and, in this brief, I argue that it is a more accurate, effective and transparent method of capturing information than traditional methods.

Literature / Research

There have been several articles written, but there appears to be very little research into the efficacy of the various methods used by interviewers to capture information. The research that is available is (perhaps understandably) more focused on electronic recording for law enforcement interviews.

In 2013, AWI's own Keith Rohman and Elizabeth Rita wrote a comprehensive article examining the pros and cons of the various methods used by interviewers, including electronic recording (Rita and Rohman, 2013).

The many benefits of electronic recording are discussed below.

Interview Engagement / Data Quality / Listening Better / Concentrating Better

One of the primary benefits of recording an interview (audio or visual) is that it allows the interviewer to concentrate on the interview rather than writing notes, which can act as a distraction to both the interviewee and the person(s) asking the questions. This in turn often leads to a disjointed interview where key information can be overlooked, forgotten or missed (CSR- Center for Strategy Research Boston, 2006).

Furthermore, studies have shown that recorded interviews allow the interviewee and interviewer to develop and foster a better relationship and rapport during the proceedings, which led to the interviewee disclosing more detailed and in-depth information (Mary, 2008). This finding is further supported by a 2003 study, which noted that, during recorded interviews, the body language, interview methods and behaviour of law enforcement officers improved and became more professional and cordial (Sullivan, 2010). It was observed that officers avoided threatening and antagonising behaviours and built a better rapport with interviewees, which, in turn, produced less confrontation and more productive interviews (Sullivan, 2010).

In addition to fostering a more positive, interactive and informative dialogue with interviewees, audio and visual recording also improves the quality and transparency of the information provided. With note taking, there is often an increased risk of the interviewer being more subjective or misinterpreting the information provided to him or her by the interviewee (Sullivan, 2010). An audio or visual record, therefore, provides an unbiased and true recitation of the interview, which provides greater context and a holistic picture of the situation (Sullivan, 2010).

Moreover, rather than simply relying on notes taken, the interviewer has the ability to review and replay the interview at a later date and potentially identify key information that may have been missed during the interview (Sullivan, 2010).

Supervision/ Performance Monitoring / Training

Recording interviews also offers a distinct advantage over simple note taking from a management and training perspective, as it allows for the interviewer's performance to be evaluated and used for further training (Sullivan, 2010). This then allows for the provision of feedback, improving the interviewer's technique and ensuring more informative and productive interviews in the future.

Data Storage, Archiving and Sharing

A further disadvantage of relying purely on note taking during interviews is that hard copy notes usually require a level of interpretation on the part of the person who wrote them. If for some reason the writer is unavailable at a later date when the notes require interpretation, then the value of the notes may be lost. On the other hand, audio or video recordings offer a much more objective record of events that can be easily shared or used by other persons working on the project or investigation without the validity of the information contained being in question (Sullivan, 2010).

Furthermore, audio and visual files can easily be stored and archived on a hard drive or cloud based server for later access if need be.

Protection from Allegations of Impropriety / Misconduct

As they provide an objective record of the interview, video and audio records allow interviewers to protect themselves against allegations about the way in which the interview was conducted. The process of recording interviews provides any reviewing body/person with a clear and transparent record of the interview, which is crucial when confusion or debate arises about any of the following:

- Words/statements provided during the interview.
- Context of the information provided.
- Nature, format and tone of questions (leading, open, etc.).
- Interviewers' compliance with relevant rules and regulations.
- Voluntariness of interview.
- Coercion, entrapment and duress, and other forms of misconduct.

Rebuttal of Historic Concerns

One of the primary concerns often raised about recording is that it will interfere with “open” or “frank” discussion. The author would argue that this view has somewhat sinister overtones and is easily rebutted by pointing out that such discussions are at increased risk of accusations of inappropriate questioning techniques at best and professional misconduct at worst. If the information obtained is to be relied upon, it should be captured in a transparent and defensible manner.

It is also often claimed that recording creates unease in the interviewee. Based on his experience, the author has found the opposite to be true, particularly with digital recorders. In that case, interviewees often quickly forget that the interview is being recorded and start engaging in a reasonably normal level of conversation. In fact, this very point can be made **against** note taking. In the author’s experience, interviewees will often pause to wonder what the interviewer is writing and question (in their own minds) if the writing was triggered by a particular comment. The note taking interviewer also has to pause regularly, which can interrupt or break the flow of the discussion.

Another historic concern has been the reliability of recorders. However, the advent of digital recorders has overcome many of the technical issues that used to arise with tapes and other analogue recording media. A good quality digital recorder has days’ worth of recording capacity in a case not much larger than a cigarette lighter (which also helps with interviewees forgetting it is even there).

Conclusion

Innovation is about introducing new ideas to improve the way we do things. Globally, information is increasingly being digitised for more accurate and efficient collection, sharing, management and reproduction. If the role of the investigator is to gather the “best” evidence, then electronic recording offers many benefits over the other methods, including accuracy, level of detail and the protection of the interests of all involved. **Let’s innovate** and make it the standard for workplace investigations.

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