CM BRIEFING

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Fast-tracking research with paired interviews

Trying to understand and evaluate even simple collaborative activities, such as document creation, can be time consuming and difficult using traditional one-on-one research techniques. Does it really need to be so difficult?

Collecting too much data

Conducting individual interviews with everyone involved in a process can generate vast amounts of data. The problem is that it is impossible for the interviewer to destinguish the important information from the insignificant until they evaluate their findings. So the interviewer has to record everything that occurs during each session.

Identifying trends and issues from large amounts of data is difficult, time-consuming and a specialist task. Many research teams fail because they simply have more information than they are able to evaluate.

Paired interviews provide clearer and quicker results

A paired interview is a method of collecting information from several people at the same time who represent the target audience. The paired interview is not two interviews being conducted simultaneously. The emphasis of the paired interview is to create a dynamic in which the participants interact with each other. In so doing, they validate or clearly identify differences in working practices and terminology.

When to conduct a paired interview

Paired interviews should be considered in the following situations:

- When trying to understand collaborative workflows, consider speaking to several people who regularly work together.
- When trying to identify differences in working practices between teams or offices, consider speaking to several people who perform the same tasks, but are based in different teams or offices.

Conducting paired interviews

Unless the participants share a working space, it is best to conduct the paired interview in a neutral environment such as a meeting room.

Typically a paired interview should begin with the interviewer introducing the subject matter and asking the participants to talk about it. Ask one of the participants to identify the activities involved in a specific task. Getting the participant to record activities on Post-It Notes can save a lot of note-taking and ensures any differences in behaviour are clearly visible.

With the creation of each note, the interviewer should encourage the second participant to compare whether or not they use the same workflow and terminology.

Although this process may initially be slightly stilted, after a couple of activities the participants should be interacting without much encouragement from the interviewer.

As the two participants detail and discuss their workflows, the interviewer is free to observe, take notes and seek clarification where necessary.

Getting the most out of a paired interview

To get the most benefit from a paired interview the interviewer must ensure that both participants contribute to the session.

Consider the following guidelines for the interviews:

- Silence is not a sign of agreement
- Alternate which participant is describing the process.

Watch out for dominant participants

All forms of multi-person research run the risk of being dominated by one of the participants. This is especially likely if the participants have a dominant-subservient working relationship.

If one of participants starts to dominate, the interviewer should direct questions specifically to the quieter participant.