Interviews and Observation

Interviews and *observations* are field study methods like contextual inquiries. In both cases, you should visit the participant "in the wild" to better understand how they get their work done in the context of their work.

Field Study Tips

These tips are relevant for any type of user sessions you run but are particularly relevant for interviews and observations where you typically meet with individuals.

- Be a good listener
- Remain neutral: don't react
- Focus on goals first, tasks second
- Avoid discussions of technology
- Don't limit yourself to a fixed set of questions
- Encourage story telling
- Distance yourself from the product
- Avoid making the user a designer
- Categorize notes = easier analysis
- Analyze your notes within 48 hours
- Ideally should be performed in teams
- Don't use questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no" Don't ask leading questions
- Don't use jargon
- Don't draw attention to specific issues that you care about

From Jakob Nielsen, Field Studies Done Right: Fast & Observational

Interviews

Strengths

- Assuming it's done in the wild, it allows for understanding context or work
- Enables understanding how users understand their work
- Analyzing goals of work
- Ability to follow-up and clarify as the conversation is happening
- Builds relationships

Weaknesses

- Relies on user to self-report accurately and at the right level
- Experts often have an inability to describe what has become subconscious (unconscious competence)
- More time intensive for facilitator than with surveys or focus groups
- Can miss subtleties since user's will likely leave out what they think are unimportant details

For more on interview techniques see:

- Nondirected Interviews: How to Get More Out of Your Research Questions
- Face to Face With Your Users: Running a Nondirected Interview

Observation

> *"Users are perfectly capable of expressing their latent needs. They just can't do it verbally. That's why we do ethnography and empathic research"* - Rich Sheridan, *Menlo Innovations*

Strengths

- Allows you to watch what people do rather than rely on what they say (self-report)
- You are more likely to discover unmet user needs as you watch them do their work and can identify areas they struggle
- You can truly understand how users get their work done in context
- Allows for observing subtleties of work -- you'll see things like post-it note cheat sheets they require to remember how to get through system
- Overcome experts' inability to describe what has become subconscious

Weaknesses

- Can be a significant time commitment, particularly if you observe for extended periods of time
- Difficult to be "a fly on the wall" and really just observe without interrupting by just being there or asking questions along the way
- Relies on observers' interpretation
- Can be challenging to know what to pay attention to if a lot is going on

For more on observation techniques see:

- Usability Net's definition
- UIE Seminar: Field Studies: The Ultimate Tool in Your Usability Toolbox - purchase for $129