

Ethnographic Interviewing for Competency Capture



Identifying the Skills of the High Performers

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Ethnographic interviewing is a research technique used by *ethnographers* for the purposes of understanding another person's and group's culture. When ethnographers speak of *culture*, we are looking to understand the practices, beliefs, rituals, symbols, and relationships that define that culture. Typically, this has involved persons travelling to distant lands to study 'exotic' groups whose cultures were poorly understood or unknown. Anthropology was primarily the home of ethnographic research, with some limited use of ethnographic techniques by other social sciences.

While any methods can be used as part of an ethnographic study, a few key features are essential to a good ethnographic study. These include:

- A focus on **naturalistic inquiry** to capture how things regularly happen;
- **Limited assumptions** or presumptions about what one is going to find (or looking for);
- An interest in people's meanings around their **lived experiences**;
- An emphasis on the **point of view** of those who are being studied.

More recently, ethnographic methods and techniques have been adopted by those in industry to understand more about their target audiences than could be gathered through more structured techniques. In business, ethnography is used to capture the 'voice of the customer,' understand the 'needs of the user,' examine how technology situates in people's lives, and reveal unanticipated insights from which innovation is possible. These outcomes are made possible by the ethnographer's approach of suspending one's own point-of-view and investigating the perspectives of those being studied. In ethnography, we speak of this being the *emic* perspective, or the *native's point-of-view*. Also important is our focus on detail and meaning.

This project applies ethnographic interviewing for the purposes of trying to understand what makes your top performers so successful. Turn tacit skills into explicit knowledge through *workplace studies*, which is an area of ethnography focused on understanding workplace practices. This approach is interested in how people accomplish their work as a routine and practical everyday activity, including contingencies, exceptions, and ad hoc ways that work works. Using ethnographic interviews, we will capture those competencies.





Exercise: Interviewing another Person

Like any other kind of skill, ethnographic interviewing improves the more that we do it. For this exercise, you are to take a brief period of time (no more than 15 minutes) to engage with another person of your choosing around some activity in which they regularly participate. It does not have to be an activity that they even like (for instance, children doing homework). As with the other exercise, it is fine to do something that is very routine and mundane. In fact, trying to interview someone around routine activities is precisely the kind of thing that we want to explore since people don't regularly think about *how* and *why* they engage in those activities.

In this exercise, it is important to remember some key features of an ethnographic interview. You should be mindful of these following:

- **Keep it conversational:** A key part of the ethnographic interview is that it can feel like more of a conversation than an interview.
- **Think before speaking:** Don't be afraid to pause and reflect on what someone is saying. It is okay to think about what was just said before asking the next question, which also shows that you are engaged in the conversation.
- **It is okay to not know:** Even if you are familiar and knowledgeable about what is being discussed, it can be important to either act like you don't know, or pause your knowledge to ask the next question. Maintain an intentional naivety about the topic you are discussing.
- **Ask "why":** Asking "why" can be an important probing device to get the person to reflect on something s/he may have never considered. Sometimes you can take a "devil's advocate" position to challenge what is said.
- **Search for meaning:** You should explore what things mean to the person to whom you are speaking. There are a lot of techniques to do this, such as asking the person to think of an image that comes to mind in association with an activity, or how does it make you feel when the activity goes well or poorly.
- **Maintain your heading:** It can be important to keep in mind what you are trying to accomplish through the interview, and what information you are hoping to gather. It can be easy to get sidetracked down different paths. While interesting, they might divert you from your information goal.
- **Have fun exploring:** One of the fun aspects of ethnographic research is that you explore worlds that are right in front of you, but you never took the time to understand. Have fun with the process!



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He has conducted trainings in a variety of educational and corporate environments. Some of the topics he has trained on include creating better customer experiences, qualitative data collection and analysis, ethnographic investigations, diversity and inclusion, employee-centricity, building workplace communities, and creating innovative cultures through design principles.



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