White Paper

Understanding More From Stakeholders: Getting more from the fact-finding interview

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Before implementing any kind of process improvement, it is extremely important to gain an understanding of the current situation, and to establish an understanding of any current process problems. By gaining a thorough understanding of any existing problems and analyzing their root causes, we can ensure that any solution we implement solves them.

To gain this thorough understanding, we'll need to understand how the process works, whether any IT systems are involved, and how the various actors or business departments that are involved interact with each other. We'll need to understand how the work flows, and whether there are any bottle-necks. We may even need to delve down and identify how individual tasks or activities are undertaken.

A commonly used technique to help us understand these factors is interviewing. Along with observation and workshops and other related techniques, it is one of the most common ways used to elicit information about the current situation. Yet there are pitfalls awaiting even the most experienced interviewers. Stakeholders might inadvertently miss out key information, or they might feel uncomfortable discussing items which are more controversial. Misunderstandings might arise due to different use of specific words, acronyms and terminology. Alternatively, in a worst-case scenario we might have interviewed the wrong stakeholders altogether! This article discusses how to use interviews, alongside other elicitation techniques, to gain as much possible insight from our stakeholders whilst avoiding potential pitfalls. It provides a useful set of potential questions and guidance for those undertaking interviews.

Finding the Stakeholders

As mentioned above, interviewing is a common and very useful way of eliciting information about the current process and the current business situation, and is often used alongside other elicitation techniques. However, for it to be most effective, it is important that we consider precisely what information and insight we are aiming to glean and, importantly, which stakeholders we want to target with an interview.

This sounds like a relatively straightforward question, but in practice it isn't always immediately obvious. In fact, rarely will we be fortunate enough to be presented with a full list of stakeholders to work from. Here a potential pitfall lies; sometimes, when there is pressure to improve a process quickly, there can be a desire to 'hit the ground running' rather than consider the wider stakeholder landscape and identify the key players. Yet, if we fail to do so we might miss something critical – or even worse, we might leave a significant stakeholder group feeling disengaged who will later obstruct or reject the improvements.

It is, therefore, likely that we'll need to do some investigative work up front. Whilst there are no hard and fast rules for identifying stakeholders, it can be useful to consider a variety of angles, a variety of which are outlined in figure 1 and are explained further below. Of course, not all stakeholder types will apply in all situations, but it is worth considering the wider stakeholder landscape to see who might be interested, impacted or hold authority over the project or process which is being considered.

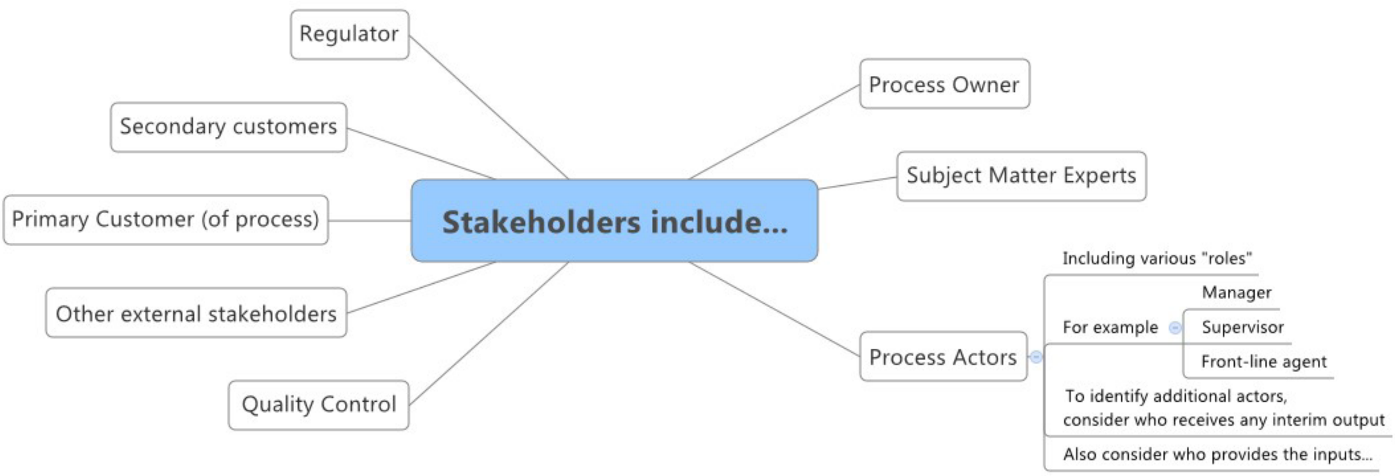

Figure 1: Example stakeholder types

Each of these potential stakeholder types is described further in the list below:

Internal:

- **Owner:** Who 'owns' or is accountable for the overall process?
- **Subject Matter Experts:** Which SMEs are required to help understand the process? These are often people who aren't directly involved in the day-to-day execution of the process, but have a broad understanding of the problem domain.

- **Process Actors:** Which departments or teams take part in the process? This might involve directly undertaking tasks, or providing information, expertise or other inputs.
    - ***Roles:*** Within the departments or teams, are there different roles (for example manager, team leader, worker): If so, these stakeholders might have very different views and requirements.
    - ***Interim outputs:*** Who received the output of each step of the process?
    - ***Quality Control:*** Does anyone monitor or quality check any tasks within the process?

External:

- ***Primary customer (of the process):*** Who is the ultimate beneficiary (or victim) of the process, or who receives its output? Most end-to-end processes will deliver benefit to a customer, but in some cases the customer might have the process imposed on them, and we might therefore consider them a victim. For example, anyone who received a parking ticket might not feel like a customer of the 'issue & collect parking fine" process! The primary customer is normally external, and in many cases will trigger the start of the process.
- ***Secondary customers:*** In some cases, there may be other beneficiaries too. Building on the parking service example above, it could be argued that the local council is also a beneficiary as they receive the revenue from the tickets. Certainly, it would be essential that they are represented. Secondary customers are often external to the organization.
- ***Regulator:*** Which regulatory bodies have jurisdiction over the process?
- ***Other external stakeholders:*** Other external stakeholders may be relevant depending on the process and the proposed change. For example, suppliers, out-sourced partners, etc.

The precise number of stakeholders will of course vary on the specific change initiative under examination, but the list above can be used as a useful 'aide memoir.' When identifying stakeholders, it is also extremely useful to consider the power and influence of each stakeholder, and how much they are likely to be impacted by any changes we make. Stakeholder analysis is out of the scope of this paper, but there are some excellent approaches outlined in the further reading section. Whichever approach is used, it's important to compile a list of stakeholders for further consideration.

Deciding who to interview and setting the scene

Having established the likely stakeholders who have an interest or influence over our process or area of change, it is useful to decide who we need to interview. In some cases, a workshop or observation might be appropriate too, and we can plan for this separately. However, even in these cases it can be useful to interview key stakeholders first to understand their views, concerns, and key areas of focus.

When deciding who to interview it is worth considering what type of information each stakeholder has. Often senior people within an organization will be able to provide a huge amount of breadth and will be able to paint the 'big picture.' Front-line workers who are close to the detail will be able to provide an extensive amount of depth about the individual tasks that they undertake. It's often, therefore, useful to interview a range of stakeholders – starting towards the top of the organization, and then working into more and more detail. The question to ask is "which of these stakeholders can provide valuable insight into the context, the process, the problem, any constraints and who can help validate any possible solutions?"

Having decided who to interview, it is extremely useful to have a pre-interview conversation – perhaps via phone – to set the scene with them. This serves a number of purposes; firstly, it helps us to build rapport (particularly if we've never worked with them before). It also provides us with the opportunity to explain a bit about our role, the types of information that we'll be looking for, and also to discuss logistics like timing and location for the interview. However, it can also save us time: If an individual doesn't feel that they can provide the information that we are looking for, they can tell us. In fact, they might even refer us directly to another stakeholder – which means that we get to the right person on the first occasion.

After this initial conversation, as with any meeting it is useful to send an agenda for the interview itself. This agenda should cover the key pieces of information that we're most interested in, which will provide our interviewee with the opportunity to prepare.

Formulating fact-finding interview questions

It would be ill-advised for us to turn up and meet our interviewees unprepared, as this is likely to lead to a situation where we risk going off track. It is, therefore, extremely useful to prepare a list of questions in advance. In reality we may not stick to them rigidly, as our interviewee might mention something useful and unexpected, but by having a broad plan we can increase the likelihood of getting the insight that we need.

Much has been written in the past about the types of questions that can be asked. Whilst there are many question types, there are three that are of particular use when we are interviewing:

Open questions: These are questions that don't have a definitive (binary) response. For example "Can you tell me the biggest problem that your department experiences within this process?"

Closed questions: These have a definitive and closed response, often "yes/no." For example "Are you responsible for answering customer complaints?" Closed questions are particularly useful for checking understanding, for example by asking "If I've understood you correctly, then your team processes 25 complaints a day, is that correct?"

Funnelling questions: Funnelling is a term that describes the use of several questions in succession which allows us to delve into more and more detail about a particular problem, issue or area of interest. It is difficult to fully plan these in advance, and they may require us to think on our feet. To create a question funnel, it is normal to use mostly open questions, using closed questions to check for understanding and accuracy. This idea is illustrated in figure 2, below:

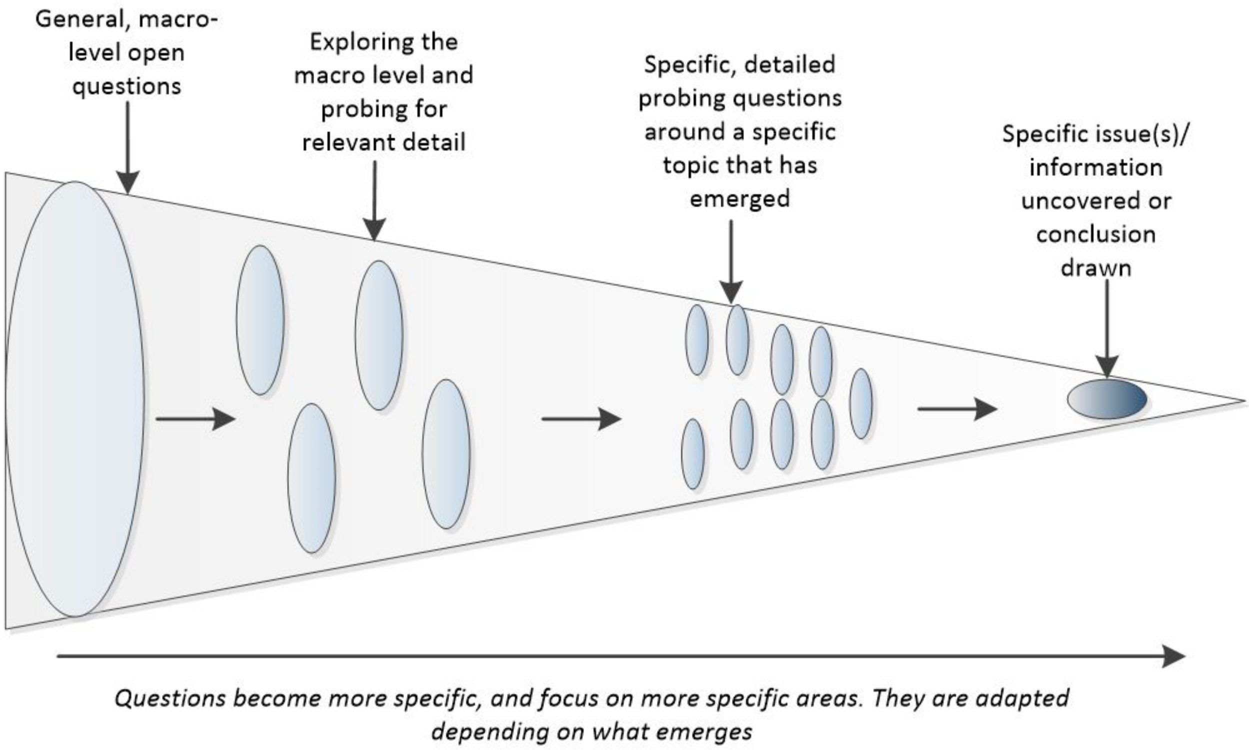

Figure 2: Funnelling questions (©Blackmetric Business Solutions, Used with permission)

A list of potential questions, and the types of information that they are likely to glean is listed overleaf. This can be a useful quick reference guide and aide-memoir when planning interviews:

Information needed	***Potential question***
Context	
General context	Can you explain your role?
Process owner	Who could decide that we are going to radically change how we undertake this process?
Start & Endpoint of process or task	
Triggering event for a process/task	How do you know when to do…. How do you know when to start….
Outcomes/Outputs	What happens once you have completed this task? What output is created? Where does it go?
Detailed task steps	Can you talk me through how you do this?
Constraints/rules	Are there any constraints over how this is performed? Are you aware of any rules, policies or regulations that affect how this is performed?
Branches and exceptions	What happens when….? What happens if…? Is there anything else that can happen?
Task support	What information, tools, or systems do you need to undertake this task?
Stakeholders of process/task	Who knows or cares whether the task is done? Who would chase you if it isn't done?
Measures	Are there any measures that apply to doing this? How do you know if it's been done well?
Feedback	Do you receive feedback on the outcome of this?
Existing documentation	Does any documents exist that describe how this is done? Are there any help documents/user guides? Are there any documented procedures or processes?
Other actors/duplication	Does anyone else in the organization do this? Does anyone else do anything related or similar?
Likely problems and effects	
Problems	Are there any problems with this task/process? Why do these problems occur? Have any attempts been made to solve these problems in the past? Is anyone else aware or affected by these problems?
Effects	What happens when these problems occur? What is the effect or outcome?
Desired future state	What could be improved about this? In an ideal world, how would you change this?
Other information	Is there anything else, in addition to the questions that I've asked, that you feel I should know about?

Table 1: © Blackmetric Business Solutions Ltd, used with permission.

The interview itself

Having set up the logistics for the meeting and prepared the questions in advance, the next step is to carry out the interview itself. Whilst doing this, we need to keep in mind that being interviewed about the work that is undertaken can be a rather daunting experience for some front-line stakeholders. Some stakeholders may equate "process improvement" with "automation and redundancy of staff," so (assuming this isn't the plan) it's extremely important to put their minds at ease. It can be useful to explain a little bit about the overall objectives, and also to explain how it is likely that any process improvements will make the stakeholders lives easier. For example, by removing duplicated steps this might mean there is less of a backlog and more time for different types of work.
By explaining that the information they provide is an important input to the improvement process, we will hopefully illustrate the key role that they play.

There may of course be sometimes when it's necessary to discuss something controversial, or where we want to provide the stakeholder with the freedom to speak completely openly. In these sorts of situation, we might consider holding the interview away from their desks, perhaps in a meeting room – or even off-site completely if it is a very controversial matter.

Having set the scene, we can then proceed to ask the questions we had planned. Interviewing is as much art as science, and it's likely that we'll flex from our plan based on the responses that our interviewee gives. However, keeping the 'funnelling' concept in mind can be helpful – we are aiming to get more and more specific information in our chosen areas (and we might identify new areas of focus too).

Interviewing doesn't have to be entirely based on verbal questions. When discussing a process or task, it can be extremely illuminating to draw a process model as an interviewee outlines and describes the tasks that they undertake. This also helps us to visualize any logical branches, or areas where we might need to seek information.

In any event, whether we draw a process map or not, it is essential to keep track of what is discussed by taking notes. Towards the end of the interview, it can be useful to briefly re-cap on the main points before drawing the interview to a close.

After the interview

Once the interview is complete, it is worth reflecting on the notes taken, follow up on any actions and decide whether there are any other stakeholders that need to be engaged. It can be useful to start creating a draft process model and incrementally adding to this after each interview; if you do this it can be a useful starting point for the next interview. If there are several team members working on the same project, it's essential to ensure that your meeting notes are stores somewhere central – in any event, it is key to ensure that any process models that are created are created in a common notation and stored in a central repository.

Summary/Conclusion

Fact-finding interviews are one of a number of useful techniques that we can utilize to gain information about a specific situation or an organization's processes. For an interview to be successful, it's important that we spend time analyzing our stakeholder landscape and ensuring that we have identified the relevant people. Having identified the relevant people, it can be useful to formulate a varied set of questions in advance, creating a question 'funnel.' On top of all of this, it is essential that we consider the human side of interviewing, and empathize with the fact that our stakeholders might be reluctant and therefore it is important to do what we can to put them at ease.

Further reading

Readers interested in the topics raised in this paper may find the following resources useful:

Pullan, P, Archer, J et al (2013) Business Analysis & Leadership : Influencing Change, Kogan Page, London

IIBA (2009) A guide to the Business Analysis Body of Knowledge (BABOK® Guide) Version 2.0, IIBA, Toronto

Paul, D, Yeates, D & Cadle, J et al (2010) Business Analysis (second edition), BCS, Swindon

Cadle, J, Turner, P & Paul, D et al (2010) Business Analysis Techniques: 72 Essential Tools for Success, BCS, Swindon

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