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Conducting Successful SME Interviews

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Interviewing subject matter experts (SMEs) is one of the most common and useful methods for obtaining the information needed to create quality documents. Successful SME interviews require careful research and preparation in advance. During the interview, good listening skills, critical analysis, and the ability to maintain control of the range and depth of the interview with appropriate tact are crucial to successful outcomes. After the interview, give prompt attention to notes and any required follow-through. When working with hostile SMEs or those with poor communication skills emphasize the strengths of the relationship and develop strategies to work around any weaknesses.

Introduction

Perhaps the most universal and basic method for a technical communicator to gather information is a face-to- face interview with a subject matter expert (SME). SMEs may be engineers, developers, programmers, operators, clerks, or customer support personnel. They are the people who have experience with and knowledge of a particular system, application, product, process, or task that you need to learn about. There is a wide variety of factors that can affect SME interviews. In most cases, the SME has a job to do beyond taking time out of his or her busy day to talk with you. It is therefore critical to get the right information and optimize your interview time.

(This is particularly crucial if you work on smaller projects or if you are an off-site consultant; in these cases your contact with your SME may be restricted even further.) This article explains some of the interview techniques that I have used over the years as a technical writer and communicator. It includes steps you can take before, during, and after the interview to maximize its effectiveness, as well as some tips for handling problematic SME interviews and relationships. The majority of these techniques will apply whether you are a freelancer, a consultant, or a captive writer.

Before the interview

Before the interview begins, there are things that you can do to build a good foundation for a productive interview experience.

Define your objectives

Define the purpose of the interview. Are you interviewing to identify problem areas within a process? Or are you documenting the steps a user performs to complete a task? Once established, the purpose will help set the scope for your interview. You should also try to establish the expected or needed level of detail for the final product. Doing so on the front-end will ensure that you ask the right questions and at the right level of detail.

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(For example, a policy-level document requires more general information than a work instruction, which requires more explicit step-by-step detail.)

Research the subject matter

Review any available background material before the interview. Try to get copies of any documentation related to the task, department, company, product, or industry. Flow charts, product data sheets, and even training materials can all be valuable sources of information. The more background information you have going into the interview, the better the questions you will be able to ask.

You should also compile a list of questions or an outline of topics you want to discuss during the interview. This will keep you on track during the interview. (It also helps ensure that you do not forget any important items.) Group your questions by subject. This enables you to cover a topic in its entirety and enhances the perception that you are prepared.

Assemble your interview “toolkit”

I use common tools to stay organized during the interview, such as paper clips, binder clips, folders, highlighters, Post-it Notes, and pens with different colors of ink. These tools will help you keep your interview notes and attachments organized, so make sure you have them handy and ready to use.

Be on time for the interview

Show respect for the SME’s busy schedule by not making him or her wait on you to arrive at the interview. This is important whether the SME works for your company or for a client company. Your arrival at the interview will be the SME’s first impression of you (and your company). Make sure that impression conveys your professionalism. If you are traveling to the interview, be sure to get good directions and leave yourself plenty of time in case you encounter unexpected traffic.

During the Interview

Often, the face-to-face interview affords you the best opportunity to get content information for your documentation project. (In some cases, the interview may be the only opportunity you will have.) It is important to manage the interview flow so that you will have the time to cover the questions you need to get answered.

Use active listening skills

This technique is not as easy as it sounds. Hearing is not the same as listening. Hearing is the perception of sound, whereas listening is attention to what is being said. Active listening requires that you give the speaker your complete and undivided attention. When

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you listen actively, you are focused on listening, not talking. Do not get distracted by mentally planning your next question so that miss the SME's response to your current question.

Ask open-ended questions

These are questions that require more detailed answers than a "yes" or "no" response. Open-ended questions start with words such as "how," "why," or "what." An example of a closed-ended question would be, "Do you implement safety checks in the manufacturing process?" The obvious answers to this question would be "yes" or "no." An alternative open-ended question that would prompt the SME for more detail would be, "How do you implement safety checks in the manufacturing process?"

(Politely) control the interview

Controlling the flow of the interview is always important, but especially so when you have tight time constraints. If the SME gets off-track, bring him or her back to the topic by asking pointed, specific questions. Be careful not to antagonize the SME in the process. You may need to continue to work with the person on other projects and bad feelings could taint future interaction. Also, remember that you can offend not only with words, but also with your tone of voice and impatient gestures. It is also important to control the environment of the interview as much as possible. If the area in which you are interviewing is distracting (for example, if the SME is receiving numerous phone calls or other employees are constantly interrupting the interview), ask if there is another location, such as an empty office or conference room, where you can continue the interview. In some cases, such as when the interviewee needs to use their computer to demonstrate a task, you may be tied to a certain location. However, you can try other tactics like asking if the interviewee can put their phone calls directly into voicemail. Ultimately, you may be forced to make the best of a bad situation.

Paraphrase information and repeat it back to the SME

This is particularly helpful when covering complex material. Paraphrasing reinforces your understanding of the information. If you cannot repeat the information in your own words, you probably do not understand it well enough to write about it. This is a definite sign that you need to ask more questions about the subject matter.

Use critical thinking skills to identify gaps in the information

The SME may not be able to explain the information in a logical sequence, but if you mentally (or verbally) rearrange the information into a chronological or sequential order, you are more likely to spot any gaps in the process flow. This is critical for task- or process related documentation. This technique works well when combined with the paraphrasing technique discussed above.

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Be accurate

Make sure you get the correct spelling of names, job titles, systems, departments, etc. Inaccuracies in the product reflect badly on the writer even though the error may have resulted from incorrect information provided by the SME. This more than anything will add to or detract from your reputation as a technical writer.

Organize your materials

Use paper clips, binder clips, folders, Post-it Notes, highlighters, pens with different colors of ink, and other tools as appropriate help you keep your interview notes and attachments organized. I find it helpful to mark areas of my notes where I need to go back and follow up or clarify information with the SME later in the interview. An example of this is the point at which a procedure branches. You will probably need to document both branches of the procedure, but it is much easier to follow one path at a time.

I use highlighters or sticky notes to mark references in my notes to forms and exhibits I need to collect after the interview.

An alternate method of doing this is to keep a running list of the items you need to get. Either method works, just be sure you try to get those items before you leave the interview, while you have the SME's attention and while the material is fresh.

Don't make promises to the SME that you are not authorized to make

Do not promise a draft or a finished product to the SME by a specific date unless you have consulted with the project or product manager and the rest of the development team. This will create problems by setting up unrealistic expectations.

If you are a consultant, do not promise services to the SME that may go beyond the scope of the contract or budget. If appropriate, discuss any questionable requests with your project manager. Any services that fall outside the scope of the project (and budget) may require a new contract or additional fee negotiation.

Closing the Interview

At the end of the interview, there are still a few things you can do to reinforce success. Ideally, at this point you and the SME have established a good working relationship and you feel pretty good about the information you got during the interview.

Thank the SMEs for their time

Commonly, SMEs are assigned by their bosses to assist writers with projects, even though the SME may not benefit directly from the end product. Expressing your

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appreciation can help turn a reluctant SME into a willing participant in future collaborations.

Ask for permission to follow up

By asking permission to follow up, you can determine whether the SME is open to additional contact. If the SME grants your request for follow-up questions, discuss how future contact should be handled. The SME may prefer to handle your questions by e-mail rather than by phone, or you may collectively decide to embed the questions in the appropriate location of the draft document, assuming that the SME will get a chance to review the draft.

After the interview

The following techniques mostly deal with follow-through, and it goes without saying that follow-through is critical in technical writing.

Review your notes while the interview is fresh

Immediately after the interview, fill in any gaps in your interview notes and decipher any cryptic notations. If you need to organize your materials better, now is the time to match pages of notes with the relevant screen prints or exhibits.

Schedule follow-up as necessary

If there are a significant number of follow-up questions or if the questions are complex, you may want to try to schedule a follow-up phone interview with the SME. Now that the interview is successfully behind you and you have all the information you need, you can begin drafting your document. With the right information and good organization of that information, writing the draft should be trouble-free.

Problem Interviews

Optimally, the writer/SME alliance will be a cooperative, symbiotic relationship. However, this is not always the case. In the real world, any number of factors—personality clashes, lack of commitment to a project, or even inadequate communication skills—can inhibit the effectiveness of the writer/SME relationship. An uncooperative or inarticulate SME can make your job as a writer unnecessarily difficult. Moreover, the quality and skill level of SMEs vary greatly and often the technical writer has little control over which SME is assigned to act as a resource on his or her project (1). However, even with a less-than-stellar SME there are some things you can do to improve the odds of success. If you work on an ongoing basis with an SME who has unsatisfactory communication skills, you may be able to establish an adequate working relationship by identifying your SME's weak points and learning to work around them. For example, if an SME is a conceptual thinker and not very detail-oriented, you could

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focus on drawing out the specifics of the conceptual issues discussed during the interview. You could also ask to see examples that support those discussion points.

Conclusion

A successful SME interview is achievable through preparation and forethought, organization, and proper management of the interview process. Not all of the techniques presented in this article will apply to every interview situation; however, most will apply to the average interview. Hopefully, some of these techniques will work for you!

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