The Benefit of Interviewing in Accounting Research

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Interviewing is an under-utilized research method in the financial accounting literature.

Interviewing is seen much more in field studies in management accounting research.

But this kind of interviewing is not of unique individuals but of ‘representative individuals’, leading to generalizable results across organizations.

Interviewing is a way to create your own database.
Much of today’s financial accounting research can go no further than demonstrate correlation – everything must be in ‘countable units’ for regression equations.

Interviewing assists the researcher in demonstrating causality.

Enables inferences about who has played leadership roles in influencing the course of change, and who has resisted change, and why.
Confers insight into the dynamic of decision-making within standard-setting bodies, advisory groups, and professional bodies (IASB, EFRAG, FASB, DRSC, Accountancy Europe)
What journals would publish research which uses interviews:

- Accounting, Organizations and Society
- Journal of Accounting and Public Policy
- Contemporary Accounting Research
- Accounting Horizons
- Accounting and Business Research
- Abacus
- Accounting in Europe
- British Accounting Review
- Australian Accounting Review
Examples of interviewees who can throw light on how organizations perform:

Liesel Knorr, former IASC technical director and former president of the DRSC
Jochen Pape, former vice-president of the DRSC
Axel Berger, former vice-president, Financial Reporting Enforcement Panel
Martin Edelmann, IASB member since 2012
Advice on the conduct of interviews

Identify active or retired individuals who are likely sources of insight and recollections

Interviewees will sometimes identify key persons who should be interviewed

Write the prospective interviewees well in advance, explaining your motivation

Do the interview in person, unless there is no option but to do it by telephone
Prepare thoroughly for the interview – study all the relevant documentation

Interviewees are not impressed by unprepared interviewers

Good preparation sometimes yields surprising revelations by the interviewees
Being well prepared enables the interviewer to improvise, by asking questions that ‘feed off’ the interviewees’ responses.

Interviewees will sometimes mention significant documents of which the interviewer is unaware.

When possible, digitally record the interview – with the interviewee’s permission.
Send the interview questions in advance to the interviewees

For many interviewees, interviewing is stressful and sometimes threatening

With the questions received in advance, interviewees can feel better prepared
Don’t make the list of questions too long – that can be intimidating

Assure the interviewees in advance that the interview will really be a conversation

Some interviewees may not have read the questions and will talk at length about what interests them – sometimes on matters of interest and novelty

Following the interview, prepare a written transcript of the interview
Apprise the interviewees that the interview is confidential – that you will not refer to them by name in your paper without their written permission.

Send selected interviewees a draft of your paper, so that they can see how their interview is treated – they will often send comments with further insights.

There is an advantage of having two interviewers: while one digests what is being said and thinks of follow-up questions, the other is carrying on the conversation – but two interviewers can be intimidating to interviewees.
My experience with interviewing projects (since 1963, in books and articles)

2001 – 2011 History of the IASB (book was published in 2015)

Japanese experience
Organizing interviews in Hong Kong and China
Considerateness of a Swedish interviewee
Interviews in French and German
Japanese experience
Frenchman in London


Hypothesis was that George Staubus’ writings on enabling investors to predict future cash flows influenced the Trueblood Study Group
1971 – 72 Wheat Report on the establishment of accounting principles: finding the one living study group member for an interview

1990 – 91 History of Dutch company reporting: there was an advantage in being a foreign interviewer in the Netherlands – interviewees would see the interview as more of an occasion, talking to someone from outside the country

Doing interviews perhaps years before starting a relevant research project – put them in an inventory of interview transcripts for future research