

Interviewing scientists for their library and information needs

April 2010

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Introduction

SLIDE 2

This presentation describes a study for understanding research scientists and their information needs.

Goals of this study

SLIDE 3

This study has two goals.

First, we want to identify scientists' best practices for information activities. We want to learn about their novel approaches for information and then promote this within the organization. Additionally, we could assess whether there is a gap between perceived best practices and actual best practices.

Secondly, we want to know what information resources and services scientists need and want.

Understanding these elements will help the Library to prioritize our planning and development.

What is the study's approach?

SLIDE 4

We are going to interview scientists – to have open-ended conversations about their research and information activities.

Why conduct these in-person interviews instead of a fast and easy web survey? Let's look at the advantages first.

Advantages of interviews

SLIDE 5

Interviews allow you to ask open-ended questions as well as follow-up questions for clarification. We can cast a wide net to understand the big picture, and we can probe deeply when we wish.

Additionally, you can get rich responses with interviews because we can prompt the participant and because in-person conversations may be more engaging.

Also, by meeting scientists in their lab, we can see how they work with information and understand their context and their natural setting.

Finally, in-person interviews let you kill two birds with one stone. While learning about scientists' information needs, we could explain the library's roles, services, and opportunities. Participants may get to know us better and become library supporters.

Challenges of interviews and their resolution

SLIDE 6

Interviews yield qualitative themes and comments. This data may not be generalizable or representative of the average scientist. To resolve this, quantitative surveys could be conducted later. The results of the interviews may help us design future surveys that are focused and of greater value.

Interviews can be labor intensive. So we will pace ourselves by conducting interviews periodically as part of an ongoing exercise.

Furthermore, these conversations might give the impression that the Library will implement the service suggestions. This is a problem of overhype and false expectations. It is important that we do not overpromise the participant and to remind them that the research goal is simply to understand information needs.

How do the interviews work?

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First, we recruit participants through snowball sampling. It's like rolling a snowball.

You recruit some potential participants – people we have access to, who may be open to participating in a library study. After interviewing them, we ask them to recommend some contacts who may be interested, and after this next set of interviews, we gather

their contacts. Reaching out to recommended contacts may encourage participation since the study has been vetted by a colleague.

With the idea of six degrees of separation, we hope to be able to interview a diverse group of scientists.

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We begin by emailing participants to arrange for a time to meet.

At our meeting, we explain that the research is anonymous and reports generated will have de-identified quotes from our discussion.

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We then show the scientist our concept map (<http://jeffloo.com/stuff/2010/interview.pdf>). In the center core, fundamental research objectives are listed. The outer white ring lists some information activities for meeting those research objectives. The outside ring outlines services, resources, and tools that support those information activities. So it's like the old lady who swallowed the cow, to swallow the dog, to swallow the cat, to swallow the bird, to swallow the spider, to swallow the fly that she swallowed in the first place. Therefore, these services, tools, and resources (i.e. outer ring) support the information activities (i.e. white ring) that allow you to meet core objectives in scientific research (i.e. center of figure).

So the participant evaluates the concept map.

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Beginning with positive psychology, we ask them to checkmark those activities that they find easy to accomplish, feel works well, or feel confident about. Hopefully this positive start will foster discussion. We ask them why these activities work well and what advice they have for fellow researchers.

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Then we ask the participant to circle those items that they find unnecessarily complicated. We ask them to explain the challenges and to identify what resources would be helpful.

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We then conclude the study by asking for requests for library resources and services – and whether they have any questions about this research or the Library.

Data is collected by taking notes on a laptop computer. We try to transcribe the conversations particularly during salient moments in the dialogue.

How will the results be used?

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The results may offer the Library ideas and suggestions for the following areas:

- the promotion and marketing of existing services and resources
- potential acquisition of new resources
- potential services development
- instructional opportunities
- library planning

Conclusion

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Here is a haiku summary:

Good service meets your
needs, experiences – let's
interview, then plan.