THINK TANK Lab

PROBLEM & STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Conducting a successful stakeholder interview

Sitting in your office, reading, and writing – that's a common misconception about think tank work. There's of course much more to it. A substantial part is talking to people. **Interviewing stakeholders is particularly relevant:**

- It gives you first-hand, unique information. **This makes your paper stand out!**
- The insights you gain are grounded in practical reality.
- Interviewing is also a networking tool: **You build new relationships.**
- And interviewing is also a way of getting your research results out: More often than not the interviewee will want to see the result of your research.

In this guide, Roderick Kefferpütz, Senior Analyst at MERICS, shares some ideas for and personal experiences in interviewing people:

1. How do you get the interview?

First: You need a plan who you want to interview and how you win them over; what's your hook? This is your first stumbling block. A random mail to the person in question can work but has a higher risk attached to it. Some ideas to contact people might be:

- **Use your network:** Check whether anyone in your network already has a connection to the person and can introduce you. LinkedIn can really work wonders.
- **Research the person you want to interview:** By researching the person you might find something that they have in common with you. Maybe they went to the same university and are a fellow alumni? Maybe they used to work at an organization that you have worked as well? See if there might be a commonality you share that you can use as a personalized entry point in your mail.
- **Domino-effect your interviews:** This can be particularly powerful. Try and get your first interview done and then use this interview as an access point for further interviews. Example: Once I interviewed someone from the Bavarian State Ministry, I was able to tell other Ministries that they spoke to me, which gave me more credibility and put pressure on them to do the same ("If the Bavarian State Ministry speaks to this guy, then he must be legit and we must also speak to him and not leave the floor just to the Bavarians!") smile
- **Prepare your mails:** Make sure your mails include all the relevant information - who you are, what you are doing, (who suggested you should get in touch with the person), what your research is about, why you are contacting the person, what this interview will be like (confidential or not, how long).
- **Be persistent:** Sending off one e-mail and just waiting for a response ain't enough. If you want interviews with relevant people, you gotta follow-up. After 1-2 weeks I would follow up my mails with a second mail, just "checking" whether they received the initial mail. After that I would usually follow up with a direct telephone call. A little trick I do in order to remind myself about follow-ups: I BCC myself in the mail and then for instance put the mail into a "pending/follow up" folder.

2. How do you prepare for the interview?

- **Get your questions down:** You are likely to only have one shot interviewing this person. So you want to make sure you get your questions down. Consider separating them into high priority, medium priority, and low priority questions. That way if time runs out or the person wants to move on, you make sure you get the most important questions in.
- **Choreograph your questions?** Now there are different ways of doing this. You could of course be very scientific/academic and make sure you always have the same questions, in the same order for every person. My experience is that you need to try and choreograph your questions a bit. Start with something easy and general - the point is: You want the person talking, feeling comfortable, and then move on from there. I would argue flexibility is key: If you are able to get new insights and information by going down a different questioning route, then you should do so rather than dogmatically sticking to your questionnaire.
- **Again, research the person:** You want to understand where this person is coming from, what their background is, how you might best connect to them and talk to them about the issue at hand.

3. How do you get the most out of the interview?

If you want to get new, confidential information then you need to be able to connect to the person, let them talk and provide absolute certainty that this information is confidential. Make sure you tell/agree with them in advance the confidentiality basis of the interview. Some other tips and tricks:

- **Let them talk:** Sometimes there might be the urge to interrupt and come in with your own views or perspectives. Try to refrain from doing this. You want to hear what they have to say. Instead, try to encourage them. Being silent can be particularly powerful.
- **Mirroring - Repeat what they say:** Another trick you can do is mirroring, so repeating what they have said. By doing so, you put the ball back in their court and they will feel compelled to go into greater detail of what they have said. Example: "What China is doing in Xinjiang is very questionable. - Reply: "very questionable?" - they will then have to explain. Mirroring is one of the techniques used by the FBI in hostage situations in order to truly understand the motivations and thinking of their counterparts.
- **Finish with a Follow-up:** Once you are doing the interview you have a unique opportunity to win the person over for more follow-ups. Always ask, whether you might come back at another point with a follow-up question, or to present your research. You want this to be a fluid connection that stays alive and not just a one-off hello-goodbye. I have finished all my interviews by saying that I also have a short MonkeySurvey survey, which I would ask them to fill out. In 99% of all cases the people were willing to fill out the interview after my talk with them as well. This was great because I then had qualitative interviews as well as a standardized online interview. And don't forget those follow-up thank you notes!