People at Work

People at Work survey: Focus group guide
Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 3
Focus group purpose................................................................................................................................. 3
Preparing for a focus group ....................................................................................................................... 3
  Size ....................................................................................................................................................... 3
  Composition ......................................................................................................................................... 3
  Duration ............................................................................................................................................... 4
  Location ............................................................................................................................................... 4
  Materials ............................................................................................................................................. 4
Conducting a focus group .......................................................................................................................... 5
  Role of the facilitator ............................................................................................................................. 5
  Format .................................................................................................................................................. 5
  Ground rules ......................................................................................................................................... 6
  Confidentiality ...................................................................................................................................... 6
  Questioning .......................................................................................................................................... 6
Data analysis ............................................................................................................................................ 8
  Step 1 - Organising the data ................................................................................................................... 8
  Step 2 - Analysing the data .................................................................................................................... 8
An example focus group analysis excel spreadsheet .............................................................................. 9
Report presentation ................................................................................................................................ 10
Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to provide tips for, and examples of, how to conduct an effective focus group to follow up the People at Work (PAW) survey and analyse the themes that emerge. Undertaking focus groups will help your organisation to communicate survey results to workers and/or other stakeholders and to inform future action planning in light of the psychosocial hazards identified from the risk assessment process. This process will provide a structure on how to consult with workers to better understand the types of psychosocial hazards and factors they may be exposed to, and strategies and controls for ensuring effective management of identified hazards.

Focus group purpose

Focus groups are ideal for consultation with workers, and enable the collection of rich information about people’s perceptions of their work environment. There are several reasons for using focus groups as a follow-up to the PAW survey, including:

- to obtain more detailed information and insight into psychosocial hazards and factors of importance to the organisation and its workers
- to better understand the opinions and issues of workers regarding their work environment and the design of work
- to establish a safe and open environment for workers to express their views about the survey results
- to provide a broad representation of diverse ideas and experiences on the topic
- to generate strategies and solutions for addressing psychosocial hazards and factors in the future

Preparing for a focus group

It is important to be planned and organised in delivering focus groups to ensure that you get accurate and practical information from your participants. The following considerations will help to ensure your focus group is set up for success.

Size

A focus group needs to be large enough to generate ideas, but not too big that participants feel overwhelmed by the size of the group or do not get the opportunity to make a contribution to the discussion. However, if the group is too small, there can be less energy and a lack of diversity in experiences. Thus, the ideal size for a focus group is six to 12 participants. Typically, if the focus group exceeds 12, the facilitator will find it increasingly difficult to manage the time and group dynamics.

Composition

Focus groups designed to understand and explore survey responses are usually conducted in teams or workgroups. Thus, more often than not, participants already know each other and have similar job roles and common task goals. However, there also is an opportunity to change the dynamic of the focus group through cross-team participation, thereby creating a mix of participants with different
backgrounds and experiences. The approach that is best for the organisation will depend on culture, team dynamics, and facilitator experience. Intact teams/workgroups could be selected if the consultation is only relevant for one area, or a thorough consultation is required (with every major workgroup participating). Forming focus groups from a representative sample of workers across teams can speed up the data collection process, but may require extra facilitation skill to develop rapport between members and promote open discussions.

Duration
The duration of a focus group can influence the credibility of the process. The ideal time is 60 to 90 minutes. Sessions that are shorter are unlikely to delve into issues in a meaningful way and if they are longer, participants will become fatigued or bored, withdrawing from the conversation. Facilitator set up time is not included in the 60 to 90 minutes. Thus, it is best to arrive early to prepare the room and ensure that any audio/visual equipment is in working order. Participants should be asked to arrive five to 10 minutes before the session in order to get settled, enabling the most effective use of time.

Location
It is important to consider the message the location of the focus group sends to participants. Is it too small for the number of attendees? Is there sufficient lighting to keep participants energised? Is there access to audio/visual equipment? Will the room provide adequate privacy for participants to openly express their views? Will the focus group be held onsite or offsite (which, of course, will depend on the culture of the organisation and budget)? The ideal seating plan for a focus group is a U-Shape or a circle, preferably without a table acting as a physical barrier.

Materials
The facilitator should effectively prepare for the focus group by arranging for the following materials:

- **Name tags** - it is a good idea if participants do not know each other. It is worth exercising some caution in having participants identify themselves. Contributions to discussion should be confidential; participants may feel more open to participating if they know their names aren't being recorded against comments they make.

- **Notepads and pens** - it is good to make use of notepads (or butcher paper or sticky notes) if the facilitator feels that participants are reluctant or nervous about speaking up, or if the conversation is becoming stale. Participants can individually (or in pairs) write down ideas for group discussion and these can be displayed on the wall. This strategy can help to energise the group.

- **Clock** - a clock is very important for time management. Make sure you place the clock in your field of view so that group rapport can be maintained.

- **Refreshments** - whether food and/or beverages are provided will depend on ‘how things are usually done’ in the organisation and budget constraints. Be careful to ensure that refreshments do not become distracting to the task at hand. One approach is to provide lunch or morning/afternoon tea (before or after the focus group), both as a thank-you to participants for their input and to encourage social interaction/continued discussion.
Conducting a focus group

Conducting focus groups might initially seem difficult, particularly if the facilitator doesn’t have previous experience conducting such processes. Planning and organisation can help to ensure things go smoothly, as the facilitator can focus on the discussion and not become distracted by things that might have been missed. The following considerations will help to manage your focus group in order to elicit the best possible input from participants.

Role of the facilitator

The facilitator should be a member external to the team (e.g. a representative from the human resources department, a manager or senior worker from another team, or an external consultant). It is not always necessary to invite consultants or external parties to conduct these sessions as long as the chosen person can remain objective and refrain from influencing the discussion or outcomes. The facilitator needs to have good observation and listening skills and has a very important role in:

- setting ground rules for group behaviour
- managing the time available
- ensuring all questions are covered
- attending to group dynamics and managing any conflicts or disagreements that may occur
- ensuring each participant has the opportunity to speak
- keeping the discussion on topic
- reassuring participants that their confidentiality will be maintained
- providing appropriate feedback to management.

Remember focus groups can be a very powerful tool to obtain information about psychosocial hazards and factors in the workplace and their drivers, as well as ideas for improvements and action planning. The above tips and suggestions will help to ensure that your focus groups are effective and worthwhile.

Format

The facilitator should introduce the session, purpose, and expected outcomes. A brief recap of the survey results should then be provided to participants to ensure everyone is starting with the same level of knowledge (although it is important to ensure that all participants have received a written overview of the survey results well before the focus group). A suggested format for the discussion to follow includes:

- introductions
- ground rules
- confidentiality
- review of survey results
- questioning including:
  - engagement questions, exploration questions, exit questions
  - questions to avoid
Ground rules

When setting the scene for the focus group, the facilitator should make the following points:

- as a courtesy to all participants and to limit distractions, ask participants to please switch off or turn to silent all mobile telephones and other devices.
- advise participants that there are no right or wrong answers, only opinions and it is important to respect each individual’s opinion. While it is appropriate to disagree in a respectful manner, it is counterproductive to criticise or put down another person for expressing their views. One way to do this is to use “I” statements, where you say “I hear what you are saying, but I think” rather than “you’re wrong”.
- to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally and feel heard and respected, remind participants to not interrupt someone while they are speaking.
- it is important to inform participants that finger pointing and blaming should be avoided; we are here to address the issue, not an individual.

Confidentiality

All responses and opinions expressed in the focus group should remain confidential. The facilitator has a responsibility to ensure the privacy of participants. The facilitator should inform participants that their responses will be documented (via note-taking) but that their names will be never be recorded in relation to specific issues or direct quotes, or any reports arising from the focus groups. The facilitator should explain to participants how the focus group data will be used and with whom it will be shared. Such procedures will help to alleviate concerns relating to confidentiality and using the results to single out specific individuals.

Participants themselves also have the responsibility of respecting the privacy of their fellow participants and should, therefore, be requested not to repeat what they hear during the focus group outside of the session.

Questioning

Questioning is the most important tool the focus group facilitator will use, as this is the method required to obtain relevant information from participants. The facilitator should prepare a list of questions prior to the focus group. The questions should be open-ended and start general to encourage participant involvement and then move towards more specific questioning. Here are some examples of the types of questions that are effective in focus groups:

Engagement questions

These questions elicit factual responses and are non-threatening. Such questions also can be good ice-breakers to get participants talking. For example:

- Has anyone participated in a focus group before?
• How was the experience for you?
• What worked well or not so well?

**Exploration questions**

These questions provide an opportunity to get more specific, introduce dedicated questions, and explore answers more thoroughly. For example:

• As highlighted in the psychosocial risk assessment report for your workgroup, ‘role overload’ was found to be quite high. Can you tell me about your experiences with role overload?
• How can you tell if members in your team are feeling under time pressure?
• What do you think are the reasons for this finding?
• What are some of the things this organisation can do to address role overload?

It also is a good idea for the facilitator to ensure that the glossary of terms for People at Work is available during the focus group (found in the report), so that participants can be reminded about the meaning for each high job demand and low job resource.

**Exit questions**

These questions help to ensure the facilitator has not missed important issues and that all participants have had their say. For example:

• Does anybody have anything else to add?
• Have I missed any key issues you would like to discuss?

**Questions to avoid**

Leading questions: these give direction and the desired answer, for example:

• So, do you agree that…?
• How bad was it that…?
• Management did…, didn’t they?
• Would you say that…?

Value-Laden Questions: emotionally charged words should be avoided, for example:

*Should staff be forced to…?*

*Should managers demand…?*

Some examples of emotionally charged words include blame, claim, demand, fair, ignore, force, coerce, insist, unreasonable, unhelpful, and purport.

Double-barrelled questions: have you ever… and what was it like? Separate the question into two parts.

**IMPORTANT!**

It is recommended that there is a scribe present so the information and rich content are recorded in writing and the facilitator can focus on the questioning and group dynamics. However, it also is recommended that, as soon as possible after the focus group, the facilitator takes the time to reflect by creating his or her own set of written notes.
Data analysis

The section below outlines a simple, yet very effective method for making sense of the data collected during focus groups.

It is critical that the scribe transcribes the data electronically as soon as possible after each focus group to ensure information is not forgotten. The facilitator should then record his or her notes into the database too, and both should meet to ensure they agree on the content. The entire focus group conversation does not need to be recorded verbatim; however, it is useful to ensure some ‘quotes’ are collected.

Step 1 - Organising the data

1. Create an Excel spreadsheet.
2. To ensure participant confidentiality, allocate each participant a number (e.g., Bob Smith = P1; Sally Jones = P2; John Wilson = P3, and so on). Remember, it is very important that the names of participants are not recorded in this document.
3. Label four columns as (1) participant Code, (2) participant Comments, (3) category, and (4) sub-category.
4. Insert each pre-prepared focus group question (and any other topics that emerged) in separate rows.
5. Underneath each focus group question, type the comments received (or quotes) into a separate line in the order in which they were said, labelling each one with the relevant participant code.

Step 2 - Analysing the data

1. Read through the entire spreadsheet to get a feel for the issues. Then, focus on each focus group question in turn. Be on the lookout for common categories, themes, and patterns, as well as unexpected comments or surprises.
2. Decide on the common themes in the data and assign them a category name (e.g. team work). These are broad categories and a good place to start.
3. Make a list of these categories at the top of the spreadsheet and allocate them a code (e.g., Tw = team work).
4. Taking each comment in turn, assign it a category code.
5. As you label with these categories, you may start to find the categories are broad and could be broken down into further themes (e.g., the issue of team meetings could be a sub-category of the broader theme of team work).
6. As these sub-categories emerge, also add these to the top of the spreadsheet, assigning them a code as you go along (e.g. team work, team meetings = TwM).
7. Excel allows you to sort using your categories or sub-categories to identity the most/least common issues (in terms of frequency), common expressions among themes, and any patterns for each participant.
Focus Group Name: ICT Delivery
Date: 01/03/2013
Location: Conference Room 1

### Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team work</td>
<td>TW</td>
<td>Too many team meetings</td>
<td>TW – m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team work</td>
<td>TW</td>
<td>Colleagues not pulling their weight</td>
<td>TW – c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple tasks</td>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Tasks too varied</td>
<td>MT – v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple tasks</td>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Too much to do with impossible deadlines</td>
<td>MT – d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing levels</td>
<td>SL</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>CM</td>
<td>Conflicting direction from management</td>
<td>CM – m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>CM</td>
<td>Lack of consultation</td>
<td>CM – c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>CM</td>
<td>Information overload</td>
<td>CM – o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>CM</td>
<td>More efficient communication channels</td>
<td>CM – e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Participant Code

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Code</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>I find it hard to focus on my work, as I always seem to be in team meetings and most of the time I struggle to understand their purpose.</td>
<td>TW</td>
<td>TW – m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>From my point of view, I think it is because we are required to juggle project and operational work, so we have too much to do.</td>
<td>MT</td>
<td>MT – v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Agree with P1, I am constantly being placed on new projects but I still have operational KPIs.</td>
<td>MT</td>
<td>MT – v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>It really comes down to the fact that we do not have enough people to do the job.</td>
<td>SL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>The biggest time waster for me is when I receive mixed messages from managers as to where they want me to focus my priorities.</td>
<td>CM</td>
<td>CM – m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Question 1
As highlighted in the psychosocial risk assessment report for your workgroup, "role overload" was found to be quite high. Can you tell me about your experiences with role overload? What are the reasons for this finding?

### Question 2
What are some of the things this organisation can do to address role overload?
Report presentation

For the team, it is as simple as confirming the categorisation of the data through the provision of a summary of the Excel spreadsheet data. This report should be presented at face-to-face meetings focused on targets and action planning for psychosocial risk management, and based on the survey and focus group results.

For management, the best approach is to summarise the categories and provide powerful comments as justification of the categories. Adding quotes also helps to give life and meaning to the report. However, ensure these comments cannot be traced back to an individual. If several focus groups are conducted across departments or workgroups, it can be worthwhile to compare the results across different focus groups to identify patterns.

Remember surveys and focus groups lose their credibility and meaning if participants
a) do not see the results of their efforts
b) do not see any action from the results.

An action plan is a useful way of bringing all the information together from the People at Work Survey and subsequent focus group sessions in an effort to guide future actions. It is a collaborative process that describes the steps that managers and workers will complete in order to help maximise the success of proposed intervention. It includes the identification of specific actions that will be undertaken as well as the timeframes for these actions, and the monitoring and review processes that will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the actions.