


People at Work: Focus group guide

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Introduction

This guide provides tips and examples on conducting an effective focus group to help further understand any themes that emerge following your People at Work survey results.

Focus groups are a way to communicate survey results to workers and/or other stakeholders and to inform future action planning in light of the psychosocial hazards and factors identified from the risk assessment process. They help 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 allows them the opportunity to contribute to the strategies, actions and controls to ensure 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 People at Work survey, including:

- obtaining more detailed information and insight into psychosocial hazards and factors of importance to the workplace and its workers
- gaining a better understanding of the opinions and issues workers identify about their work environment and the design of work
- the opportunity to establish a safe and open environment for workers to express their views about the survey results
- providing a broad representation of diverse ideas and experiences on the topic
- generating strategies and solutions for addressing psychosocial hazards and factors in the future

Preparing for a focus group

It is important to be organised and have a plan before delivering a focus group 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 so big that participants feel overwhelmed by the size of the group or ability 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. The ideal size for a focus group is six to 12 participants. Typically, if the focus group exceeds 12, the facilitator will find it 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. Often participants already know each other and have similar job roles and common task goals. Consider changing the dynamics of the focus group through cross-team participation, which allows for a mix of participants with different backgrounds and experiences. The approach that is best for the workplace will depend on culture, team dynamics, and facilitator experience. Whole 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. It is best to arrive early to prepare the room and ensure that any audio/visual equipment is working well. 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

Ensure the location provides ample room for the number of attendees, has appropriate lighting and any audio/visual equipment you may need. The room should also be private so participants can openly express their views. Depending on your workplace culture and budget you could consider holding the focus group offsite.

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 prepare for the focus group by arranging the following materials:

- Notepads and pens - notepads, butcher paper or sticky notes can be helpful 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.
- Run sheet - time management is very important. Ensure you have mapped out how you plan to run the session and keep your attendees informed throughout. Let them know how they are tracking for time if there are group discussions or they are working together as a team.
- Glossary of terms for People at Work – this should be 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.
- Refreshments - whether food and/or beverages are provided will depend on workplace policies ‘how things are usually done’ in the workplace and any budget constraints. Refreshments can become distracting, consider providing lunch or morning/afternoon tea before or after the focus group. This can work well as a thankyou to participants for their input and to encourage social interaction/continued discussion.

Conducting a focus group

The following considerations will help to manage your focus group and ensure the best possible input from participants.

Role of the facilitator

The facilitator should be a member external to the team who can remain objective and refrain from influencing the discussion or outcomes (e.g. a representative from the human resources department, a manager or senior worker from another team, or an external consultant).

The facilitator needs to have good observation and listening skills and has the key role in:

- setting ground rules for group behaviour
- managing time
- ensuring all questions are covered
- managing group dynamics and any conflicts or disagreements
- 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.

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. As soon as possible after the focus group the facilitator should take time to reflect on the session and make their own set of written notes.

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, exploration and exit questions
- summary of themes
- next steps.

It is important to finish with 'next steps' which is critical for providing participants with an understanding of what will happen with their comments, how it will be presented, and when they will hear back about a plan of action.

Ground rules

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

- Ask participants to 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 others' 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 advise attendees to use "I" statements, for example "I hear what you are saying, but I think" rather than "you're wrong".
- Remind participants to not interrupt someone while they are speaking to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally and feel heard and respected.
- It is important to inform participants that finger pointing and blaming should be avoided; we are here to address the issue, not any particular individuals.

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:

- their responses will be documented (via notetaking)
- their names will not be recorded in relation to specific issues or direct quotes, or in any reports arising from the focus groups
- not to repeat what they hear during the focus group outside of the session.
- 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 workers.

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 dedicate 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 workplace can do to address role overload?*

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 that give direction and the desired answer should be avoided, for example:

- *So, do you agree that...?*
- *How bad was it that...?*
- *Management did..., didn't they?*
- *Would you say that...?*

Value-laden questions with 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-barreled questions like *'have you ever'* or *'what was it like'* should be avoided, it is best to separate the question into two parts.

Data analysis

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. teamwork). 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 = teamwork).
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 teamwork).
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. teamwork, 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.

An example focus group analysis spreadsheet

Focus Group Name: ICT Delivery
Date: 01/03/2020
Location: Conference Room 1

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

Participant Code	Comment	Category	Sub-category
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?*			
P3	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.	TW	TW – m
P1	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.	MT	MT – v
P2	Agree with P1, I am constantly being placed on new projects but I still have operational KPIs.	MT	MT – v
P6	It really comes down to the fact that we do not have enough people to do the job.	SL	
P4	The biggest time waster for me is when I receive mixed messages from managers as to where they want me to focus my priorities.	CM	CM – m

Participant Code	Comment	Category	Sub-category
Question 2 - *What are some of the things this workplace can do to address role overload?*			
P6	Temporary increases in staffing levels at peak times would be helpful.	SL	
P3	Better electronic knowledge sharing systems so we can reduce need for face-to-face meetings.	CM	CM – e
P2	Ensure performance management and reward systems take into account all of our duties and not just some of them.	MT	MT – v
P4	Managers need to be on the same page in terms of strategic direction.	CM	CM – m

Report presentation

When discussing results with management the best approach is to summarise the categories and provide commentary and justification where required. Adding quotes can add value however any comments or quotes used should not be able to be traced back to a worker. If several focus groups are conducted across departments or workgroups, it is worthwhile to compare the results across different focus groups to identify patterns.

When discussing results with workers the final report should be presented at face-to-face meetings and focus on any targets and action planning relating to psychosocial risk management and based on the survey and focus group results. The data in the excel spreadsheet should be summarized and discussed based on categories selected.

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 the 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 their effectiveness.