

Thoughts on setting up focus groups

A focus group is a group discussion facilitated on a semi-structured basis with a representative sample of people usually from a particular peer group. It is designed to provide qualitative data on the attitudes, experiences and perceptions of a group on a given topic.

Through careful selection, the groups or 'panels' can be seen as an 'informed' audience with specific experience of the issue under discussion. Equally, they can be a random sample of people drawn together to give a broad perspective.

Composition of groups – peer groupings are to be recommended, particularly if participants are employees within an organisation. The rule of thumb is that no-one should feel inhibited because more senior people are with them – participants need to feel as comfortable as possible in the session

Size of group – we would recommend that a focus group consist of no more than eight people – any more than this may inhibit discussion. It may however, be necessary to invite more people initially to secure that eight.

Preparation and recording – it is important that invitees are briefed on the purpose of the session before they come along and reassured that the session will be confidential. Whether the session is to be recorded electronically or by a note taker, it is common practise to stress that these are aides memoire for the facilitator and will not be supplied to an employer who will receive an anonymised report.

Timing – to get the best out of everyone we suggest that the session lasts for between one and a half and two hours

Accommodation – ideally a discreet space behind closed doors and not in the corner of an open plan office, which might inhibit discussion. If possible on neutral territory i.e. not necessarily attached to one unit/department or another. A meeting room available for anyone to book is ideal. We often run focus groups for people not attached to an organisation – i.e. prospective candidates/volunteers - in a private room within a hotel/pub.