

Common Data Collection Methods for Evaluation

The following table summarizes the purpose, advantages, and challenges of some of the most commonly used data collection methods for evaluation.

Method	Purpose	Advantages	Challenges
Interview	To fully understand someone's impressions or experiences, or learn more about their answers to questionnaires	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can get full range and depth of information • can develop relationship with client • can be flexible with client 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can take much time • can be hard to analyze and compare • can be costly • interviewer can bias client's responses
Focus Group	To explore a topic in depth through group discussion—examples are to gather reactions to an experience or suggestion, understanding common complaints, and so forth; useful in evaluation and marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can quickly and reliably get common impressions • can be efficient way to get much range and depth of information in short time • can convey key information about programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can be hard to analyze responses • need good facilitator for safety and closure • difficult to schedule meeting time for six to eight people
Questionnaire, Survey, and Checklist	To quickly or easily get lots of information from people in a nonthreatening way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can be completed anonymously • inexpensive to administer • easy to compare and analyze • can administer to many people • can get lots of data • many sample questionnaires already exist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • might not get careful feedback • wording can bias client's responses • impersonal • in surveys, may need sampling and statistical expertise • doesn't get full story
Observation	To gather accurate information about how a program actually operates, particularly about processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can view operations of a program as they are actually occurring • can adapt to events as they occur 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can be difficult to interpret behaviors • observations can be difficult to categorize • can influence participants' behaviors • can be expensive

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Existing Data	To gather information on the audience or the issue; to identify what previous investigators have found about the state of the knowledge, skills, behaviors, or attitudes of the intended audience with relation to the issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can provide much information in relatively little time • has most likely been reviewed or seen by audience • makes use of already gathered information • helps to chart changes over time • provides evidence about the problem • involves minimum effort or interruption of audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can be out of date (e.g., technology needs) • data synthesis can be difficult • may not address specific questions of concern • not flexible means to get data; data restricted to what already exists • statistical data may not address perceptions of the problem, or may not address causes • reports may be incomplete
Test	To determine the audience's current state of knowledge or skill regarding the issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • helps identify a problem or a deficiency in knowledge or skills • results are easily quantified • individual performances can be easily compared • easily seen as job-related • helps determine if the problem is a training issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited availability of validated tests for specific situations • results can be influenced by attitudes • language or vocabulary can be an issue • people may be concerned about how results will be used • adults may resent taking tests
Concept Map	To gather information about someone's understanding of and attitudes toward a complex subject or topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • offers a more comprehensive and complex view of someone's thinking than a test does • could be a better tool for visual learners or test-phobic people • can gather qualitative and quantitative data • useful for adults and children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • takes training to complete properly • takes training to administer • can be challenging and time-consuming to score • can be difficult to analyze and interpret
Rubric	To assess how well someone is able to perform a task or behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focuses an observer's observations • makes a hard-to-quantify performance quantifiable • useful to assess what people do rather than just what they know • good for collecting time-series data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • development can be time-consuming because it requires the identification of all key elements of a performance • not flexible; could miss key elements if not listed on the rubric • high degree of subjectivity

(adapted from C. McNamara, http://managementhelp.org/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm)