SESSION TRANSCRIPT

Event:	2021 Water for Food Global Forum
Session Title:	Discovery interviews: Tips to get the most out of your field interviews & understand the landscape
Presenters:	Ferdinand Turatsinze, Grace Mukarusagara, Natacha Akaliza, Raïssa Urujeni, & Savant Nzayiramya
Date:	October 2021

Ferdinand: **Introduction**

Thank you everyone for joining us today. We are pleased to have this session with you. I'm your host, Ferdinand Turatsinze. I am currently in Kigali, Rwanda. I'm a researcher at the Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute. We are currently doing research in Sub-Saharan Africa to understand different types of irrigation business models, and the operations and relationships between ag entrepreneurs, their customers, and their suppliers. We aim to use this experience to support entrepreneurs and start-ups that provide sustainable irrigation supply to smallholder farmers.

I am not here by myself. I am also with DWFI team in Rwanda: Raïssa, Grace, Natacha, and Savant.

As we study irrigation entrepreneurship, we rapidly assess the irrigation ecosystem, and the key actors and functional groups within that ecosystem, using a process we call discovery interviews. Our goal today is to share key takeaways from our experience conducting discovery interviews to help you get the most out of your interviews in the field, and quickly develop your understanding of who is doing what in the agricultural landscape. We'd like to make our 30 mins together as engaging and productive as possible.

When we started conducting our discovery interviews, we used the concept of "customer discovery." Customer discovery is a set of tools that helps entrepreneurs and startups to understand the needs, pain points, and challenges of customers' before they can even build products or services. This gives entrepreneurs the understanding of the problems they are solving and the value they are bringing to the customer. We took a concept used to develop startups and applied it to study start-ups and entrepreneurship.

Customer discovery was pioneered by Steve Blank, a serial entrepreneur and business professor at UC Berkley and Stanford University. He often uses the phrase, "Get out of the building," meaning that you can't understand what peoples' needs are if you just sit behind your desk rather than going out and talking to people. In unprecedented times like this, it might look different, and reaching out to your potential interviews could be done via technology.

After all of this, you might still be wondering, "why is customer discovery very important?"

Customer discovery gives an entrepreneur an edge when talking to potential investors, but most importantly it helps in building products and services that people want and reduces the risk of failing. Just as customer discovery aids a start-up founder, discovery interviews can be used by people and groups who want to promote and support irrigation entrepreneurship – including the government agencies, multilateral organizations, universities, donors, and development banks – so that they can understand the existing supply chain, distribution channels, customer types, challenges, and opportunities.

Today, we will focus on conducting customer discovery interviews. In case you want to learn more about this, we will share more resources on the Water for Food website. If you have a question, don't hesitate to reach out to us at any point. We would love to continue the conversation.

Let me pass the conversation to Grace.

Grace: **Discovery interview best practices**

In my experience, agriculture is full of innovation, opportunities, great people, and amazing stories. Getting to meet people and learn their stories is both interesting and exciting. To explain how best to conduct discovery interviews, I would like to break this session into three main discussion topics: pre-planning for the interview, conducting the interview itself, and dos and don'ts as we share our experience and stories.

Grace: **Pre-planning before the interview**

1. *One person at a time*

When you are conducting discovery interviews, it's important to talk to only one person. He or she might be representing an organization or company. Focus groups are not a good way to collect this kind of customer information. You do not want the interviewee to be distracted. However, it is always good to have a notetaker, who could be your partner or someone within your company or organization. Having an interviewer and notetaker allows the interviewer to focus entirely on the conversation.

2. *Define your interview goal and understand your assumptions*

Before you conduct interviews, it is important to know why you are having this kind of conversation. Prioritize your learning goals ahead of time, decide on the kinds of people you want to talk with, and target interviewees accordingly. Based on your goals, you may consider speaking with multiple farmers, business owners, bank managers, government staff, non-profit program managers, and more. Consider what assumptions you have about your target interviewees.

You must research about the interviewee prior to the interview. If you want to understand how smallholder farmers work, think about what you know about how farmers operate. You could do research on the company's website or gather news around. Furthermore, do some preparation on your basic flow and list of questions. These might change in the middle of the interview, but you should be able to adapt based on what you hear.

3. *Focus on behavior and feedback*

Lastly, be attuned to behavior and mindset. Keep your interview focused on if they have a problem, how they think about the problem, and how they have tried to solve it in the past. You can also understand behavior by asking about hypothetical or 'what-if' scenarios.

4. *Get psyched to hear things that are unexpected*

Lower your expectations and prepare yourself to hear uncomfortable things. Avoid situations where you could find yourself convincing or selling or hearing what you want to hear. This is called "confirmation bias." Your goal should be learning. Finding out things that you did not expect or anticipate is perhaps the greatest value of discovery interview!

Grace: **Activity 1**

I would like everyone to take three minutes and write in the chat:

- Who is your target audience (or customer), and why?
- What are the three most important questions you would like to ask your target interviewee, and what do you guess their answers will be?

Keep in mind that your purpose is to test your hypotheses. What you've written here are your first assumptions. The point of these interviews is to see if these assumptions are correct.

Ferdinand: **Managing the interview**

Now that we have talked about the pre-interview, let's talk about what happens in the interview.

1. Disarm "politeness"

When you meet people for the first time, they can be reserved and uncomfortable to share information. So, you need to make sure people feel safe to share information and give their true opinions rather than telling you what they think you want to hear. Before the interview, you need to let them know that it is just a conversation and show sincere curiosity in their story.

2. Ask open-ended questions

Avoid asking questions that prompt yes/no answers. You need information, not confirmation. One example is asking questions like "Do you work with NGOs?" It is better to ask open-ended questions like, "Can you talk about your experience working with NGOs?" But if you forget to phrase your question this way, you can easily follow up with questions like "why" or "can you tell me about that experience?"

3. Focus on actual behavior, not speculative or abstract feelings

People tend to focus on the bright side and to talk about solutions. It is not bad but don't necessarily give you the full story. So don't let that dominate your conversation because you are not there to learn what they are only getting right. Get them to tell you stories about how they previously experienced a problem, if they tried to solve it (or why not), and what happened.

4. Listen more, talk less

Don't rush to fill the "space" when the interviewee pauses, because they might be thinking or have more to say.

Don't embed the answer you want to hear into the question, because this leads the interviewee to simply tell you what you want to hear. For example, a poorly worded question might be, "When buying an irrigation pump, what is most important to you, cost or quality?" This only lets the respondent choose from two answers. A better way to phrase this same question would be, "If you are considering buying an irrigation pump, what factors would be most important to you?"

I would like to add a pro tip, remember to ask if they can recommend you to other people in the ecosystem that could add value to your research.

Ferdinand: **Activity 2**

Now that we have learned how to interview, I would like everyone to double-check if the questions you wrote earlier are open-ended questions. If yes, thumbs up. If not, think about how you can rephrase them! You can check this by asking yourself if your question can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no," or if you are suggesting the answer in the way you posed the question.

If you answered "yes" to the above, that's a sign that you have written a closed-ended question. We recommend you revise your question to encourage discussion and revelation.

Let's give some examples here. An example of a closed question could be, "Do you think the ability to irrigate is important," and the interviewee simply answered "yes."

You could rephrase the question as "What factors are important to you when you considering investing in the ability to irrigate?" From there an interviewee will give you a detailed answer, and you can easily follow up.

If your question allows the interviewee to choose, you might think of how you can rephrase it.

A poorly-worded question would be like this entrepreneur asking a farmer, "Would you rather buy an irrigation pump that is light weight or high capacity?"

You can easily rephrase this question by asking, "Why did you purchase the irrigation pump that you currently own? What factors will you consider if you buy another pump?" This is a great example of expressing your curiosity wanting to know their pain points.

Ferdinand: **Example discovery interviews**

Now, that we have learned how to ask questions, let's watch this great example of how we start the interview and gain insights on challenges and opportunities of your target interviewee.

[*Example interview video – not transcribed*]

Ferdinand: **Discovery interview experience from Savant & Raïssa: Dos and Don'ts**

Thank you everyone, I hope you had fun watching that example of a discovery interview. I would like to give five minutes to Raïssa and Savant to share their experience–dos and don'ts–conducting discovery interviews and how long it has taken them to be comfortable interviewing.

[*Savant and Raïssa speaking – not transcribed*]

Ferdinand: **Question & answer session**

Thank you Raïssa, I understand this was a lot of information, and you probably have some questions. If you have one raise a hand or type it in the chat and my teammates will help me to answer those questions.

[*Audience Q&A – not transcribed*]

Ferdinand: **Conclusion**

That brings us to the end of our session. We would also like to thank you for your active participation. We will share some resources around discovery interviews on waterforfood.nebraska.edu. We'd really love to hear whether you end up using anything you heard today in the coming months and years. If you do, please let us know. We will host another session to talk more about how to build an ecosystem map, which is next stage after conducting discovery interviews. Thank you so much!