



Empathy Interview Resource Guide



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Summary

#1 Empathy Interview Do's and Don'ts

Use this guide to constantly revisit empathy interviewing techniques and best practices. As a rule of thumb, choose 2 Do's and 1 Don't to keep in focus throughout every interview. As best practices become habit, pick new areas to focus.

#2 Sample Interview Questions

These questions include real examples from empathy interviews with students. Use this as a starting point for generating your own questions. For all of your questions, whether from this list or not, work with your colleagues to make sure the questions are developmentally (or language) appropriate. Make sure not to violate the Do's and Don'ts if you change the structure of a question.

Group A

Each "set" demonstrates how empathy interview questions can be formulated and organized in response to larger strategic questions.



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Group B

Each “set” demonstrates how empathy interview questions can be formulated and organized according to their relevance with different stakeholders.

#3 Building Rapport

Here are some basic tips for setting expectations for yourself and the interviewee before an empathy interview begins.

#4 Capturing Notes and Quotes

4a Worksheet

Use a digital version of this form, or take written notes using this format whenever you are unable to record your interview. Be sure to pause whenever needed in order to take detailed notes and capture verbatim quotes that stand out (even at the expense of a shorter overall interview).

4b Interview Transcription

Cambiar provides transcription services free of charge for interviews that are clearly recorded with no background noise. This allows the interviewer to focus solely on active listening, instead of verbatim note-taking. This document describes best practices for recording interview files.

4c Empathy Interview Data Survey TEMPLATE

Use this form as a template for individual team members to submit key quotes and from their interviews into a single spreadsheet. transcripts or the Capturing Notes and Quotes document. The submitted data will be printed onto individual quote cards that you can use to practice interview synthesis techniques at the next Session and take back to your internal design team. It is important to remove any sensitive or personally-identifiable information from quotes and stories before you submit them. Also, please note that this is only a template and that you'll need to make a copy that is specifically for use with your team's interviews.

5 Empathy Interview Process Checklist

This is a quick start checklist for organizing, managing, scheduling, capturing and gaining consent for your interviews. To find more granular details about organizing, scheduling and gathering consent, refer to the Empathy Interview Scheduling & Administration document.



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5a Empathy Interview Tracker TEMPLATE

Use this spreadsheet template to track where each stakeholder is in the interview process (e.g. identified, scheduled, completed). This is also where Cambiar will note when interviews have been transcribed, and when your team members can signal that they've submitted their key quotes and stories. Note, this is a template and you should make a copy only for your team's use.

#6 Sample Language to Recruit Design Team

Use this template as a starting point for communicating with colleagues and staff who may want to potentially join your design team.

#7 Scoping Your Empathy Interviews

Determining the right number of stakeholder groups and interviews to conduct depends on the complexity of your project. Use this guide to think about how much you want to narrow the focus of your project and how much time you and your team are willing to commit.

Empathy Interviews



Do's

1. Try to diminish any status that comes with lived experience or seniority, and raise the status of your interviewee.
 - *Take time to establish rapport, show vulnerability and flatten the "hierarchy" if your interviewee is in a less senior or authoritative position than yours.*
2. Ask open-ended questions
3. Seek specific past or present stories using "tell me about a time/moment when..."
 - *Dates, times, days of the week are important details to capture around a moment.*
 - *If your user starts to talk in the hypothetical, ask "is there an example of where that has happened to you in the past?"*
4. Follow up with "why" or "tell me more about..." especially when your interviewee expresses emotion.
5. Dig for emotions
 - *"What feeling(s) did you experience in that moment? Is there another example or story where you felt that same emotion?"*
 - *Probe all sides of a feeling: Tell me about a time when that emotion wasn't present.*
 - *Probe analogous situations around feelings: What other types experiences bring up that same emotion. Can you share a story/example?*
6. Embrace silence. If you allow for silence, a person might reflect on what they've said and say something deeper
7. Seek your user's *personal* perspective on ideas
 - *"How/where might this idea show up in your everyday life?"*
 - *If they answer on behalf of other people, follow up with "how does it relate for you?"*
8. Ask "show me how" if it's possible for your user to demonstrate the action or activity
9. Respond to clarifications with questions, not answers
 - *If they ask for clarification about an idea "does it do X" rather than respond with an explanation, ask "how would it work for you?"*
10. Take time to capture feedback properly. This means pausing to write down important details. If possible (and with their permission), record audio or video.

Don'ts

1. Don't ask leading questions
2. Don't ask rhetorical questions or questions you think you already know the answer to
3. Don't make assumptions or fill in answers on behalf of the interviewee
4. Don't ask for one-word or "fill in the blank" answers
5. Don't ask for generalizations such as "do you usually..." or "what does a *usual* week look like"
6. Don't insert your personal experiences into the conversation
 - *Remember, though it should feel conversational, this is not a coffee date, it's an interview. Your personal examples can introduce bias into the conversation.*
7. Don't ask for hypothetical future stories or ideas
8. Don't ask your user to comment on ideas hypothetically on behalf of others
 - *You know it's a red flag if a user says, well it doesn't apply to me, but X group might really like that*
9. Don't ask "what do you think of this idea?" or "would you like this?"
 - *This invites hypothetical responses that do not always correlate with the reality of how people will behave*
10. Don't try to sell your idea.

Focus areas from Session 2

SELF EVALUATION

1. Circle the do's that you think you are doing well
2. Circle the 2-3 don'ts that represent the biggest challenges for you

Sample Interview Questions A



Set 1: How might we increase students' ownership of their learning?

1. Tell me a story about someone from your school or community who supported your positive growth and helped you to achieve something.

- a) Tell me about a time when you felt really unsupported or held back. Why?
- b) What actions did you try and take to change the situation? What happened?

2. Describe a proud moment of learning last school year. What happened?

- a) What made that so wonderful?
- b) When do you feel you are most successful as a student during the day? This week? Why do you think that?
- c) Describe a devastating moment in your education last school year. What happened? What made that so difficult?

3. Tell me your three biggest strengths...

- a) Give me a recent example of how you used one of these strengths to your advantage? [If from school, how about an example in your personal life? If from personal, how about an example from your school day?]
- b) How did you identify these as strengths?

4. Is there a specific moment in time when you surprised a teacher with your accomplishments? Tell me about how that came about. What has happened since that time.

- a) Tell me about a teacher that sees different possibilities for your future than you do. How has that changed your relationship with that teacher?

5. Tell me about the last time you had to make a difficult decision in your life? Why was it so difficult?

- a) Describe some of the decisions under your control when you are at school.
- b) What decisions at school do you want more control over? Why

Sample Interview Questions A



Set 2: How might we identify and celebrate multiple definitions of student success?

6. Who do you admire as an example of success in your school? Why?

- a) Who is the most powerful person or group of people in your community? What makes them so powerful?
- b) Who is the most powerful person or group of people in your school? What makes them so powerful?

7. How do people show respect to one another in your neighborhood or community? Why?

- a) How do other students show you respect in your school? Why? How do they show disrespect? Why?
- b) How do teachers and principals show you respect in your school? Why? How do they show disrespect? Why?

8. Tell me about a time when you felt recognized for something you were proud of...

- a) What did your community do to recognize you? Why?
- b) How did that make you feel? Why?

9. What expectations does your community or culture place on you?

- a) What expectations do your parents place on you? Why?
- b) What expectations do you place on yourself? Why?
- c) How do these expectations show up at school? Give me a recent example where you met or succeeded expectations at school. Why?



10. Tell me about a time you were proud of something you did but didn't feel supported/appreciated...

- a) How did that make you feel? Why?
- b) What do you wish your community/school had done to support you? Why?

Sample Interview Questions B



PARENTS

1. What are your child's greatest strengths? How are those strengths nurtured and leveraged in the school environment?
2. What are your child's greatest challenges? How does the school support your child with these challenges?
3. What would be the best place for you to send your child to school (if there were no issues of resources, location, accessibility)?
4. Tell me about the first time you learned about your child's performance in school. What was communicated? By whom?
5. Tell me about a specific example of a great leap forward in your child's development, and what brought that about?
6. Tell me about a time when you felt like your child was being held back. What actions did you try and take to change the situation? What happened?
7. Who have been the most helpful people at your school, and what have they said and done? Who have been the most helpful people outside the school, and what have they said and done?
8. Describe a proud moment of learning in your child's education history. What happened? What made that so wonderful? What could be done to have more of those moments?
9. Describe a devastating moment in your child's education history. What happened? What made that so difficult? What could have made it better?
10. Where do you see your child now, relative to your child's full potential?



STUDENTS

1. Tell me about your most meaningful relationship with someone at your school. Tell me a story about how they have helped you to achieve something.
2. Who is the teacher who has helped you make the most positive growth? Tell me a story about how they have helped you to achieve something.
3. Tell me about a peer who achieved something that encouraged you.
4. What would be the best place for you to go to school (if there were no issues of resources, location, accessibility)?
5. Tell me about the first time you learned about your performance in school. What was communicated? By whom? What was communicated by your school?
6. Tell me about a specific example of a great leap forward in your development, and what brought that about?

Sample Interview Questions B



7. Tell me about a time when you felt like you were being held back. What actions did you try and take to change the situation? What happened?
8. When do you feel you are most successful as a student during the day? This week? Why do you think that?
9. Who have been the most helpful people at your school (this week or this month), and what have they said and done? Who have been the most helpful people outside the school (this week or this month), and what have they said and done?
10. Describe a proud moment of learning last school year. What happened? What made that so wonderful? What could be done to help you have more of those moments?
11. Describe a devastating moment in your education last school year. What happened? What made that so difficult? What could have made it better?
12. Where do you see you are now relevant to your full potential?
13. What do you think different teachers think you will be when you grow up? (Share the full range.)
14. Tell me about a teacher who sees different possibilities for your future than you do. How has that changed your relationship with that teacher?
15. Is there a specific moment in time when you surprised a teacher with your accomplishments? Tell me about how that came about. What has happened since that time?



TEACHERS * PARAPROFESSIONALS * STAFF

1. Tell me about a student who has shown the most growth since you met them. What do you think drove that significant growth?
2. How do you know what a kid is capable of?
3. Is there a specific moment in time when a student surprised you with an accomplishment? Tell me about how that came about. What has happened since that time?
4. Talk about a time when you think you have been too demanding or pushed a student too hard. What did that look like?
5. Talk about a time when you think you didn't push hard enough to help a student grow to their potential. What did that look like?
6. Describe a student with learning or behavioral challenges. What is your role to best support this student? What is the role of other teachers in your system? Do you feel supported by other teachers in your system? What is the best way you think teachers could work together to collaborate for the best outcomes for this student?
7. What should be true of all students who graduate from your school?
8. Describe an ideal meeting with a parent or family. How would you prepare for it?



Sample Interview Questions B



PRINCIPALS * CURRICULUM DIRECTORS

1. What teachers do you know that get the best results for students and why? What is your role in ensuring student outcomes?
2. What should be true of all students who graduate from your school?
3. Can you think of a change at the school, district, or state level that has been met with resistance? Why?
4. Is there a specific moment in time when a student surprised you with an accomplishment? Tell me about how that came about. What has happened since that time? Is there a specific moment in time when a teacher surprised you with an accomplishment? Tell me about how that came about. What has happened since that time?
5. Tell me about a student who has shown the most growth since you met them. What do you think drove that significant growth? Tell me about a teacher who has shown the most growth since you met them. What do you think drove that significant growth?
6. How do you know what a kid is capable of?
7. Talk about a time when you think you have been too demanding or pushed a student too hard. What did that look like? Talk about a time when you think you have been too demanding or pushed a teacher too hard. What did that look like?
8. Talk about a time when you think you didn't push hard enough to help a student grow to their potential. What did that look like? Talk about a time when you think you didn't push hard enough to help a teacher grow to their potential. What did that look like?
9. Describe a student with learning or behavioral challenges. What is your role to best support that student? What is the role of the teachers in your system? Do you feel supported by teachers in your system? What is the best way you think teachers could work together to collaborate for the best outcomes for this student?
10. Whom do you call for advice on how to improve outcomes for kids (another principal, etc)?
11. Describe an ideal meeting with a parent or family. How would you prepare for it?



REGIONAL DIRECTORS * SUPERINTENDENT * LEA LEADER

1. What schools do you know that get the best results for students, and why?
2. Which school would you send your own kids/extended family to? Why?
3. What are the principals leading the best schools doing differently?

Sample Interview Questions B



4. Has there been a change at the school, district, or state level that has been met with resistance? Why? What kind of future changes in the state would your teachers resist? What would you resist?
5. What should be true of all students who graduate from your schools?
6. Is there a specific moment in time when a student surprised you with an accomplishment? Tell me about how that came about. What has happened since that time? Is there a specific moment in time when a teacher surprised you with an accomplishment? Tell me about how that came about. What has happened since that time?
7. Tell me about a student who has shown the most growth since you met them. What do you think drove that significant growth? Tell me about a teacher who has shown the most growth since you met them. What do you think drove that significant growth?
8. How do you know what a kid is capable of?
9. What are your non-negotiables regarding how a school operates? What is flexible?
10. Whom do you call for advice on how to improve outcomes for kids?

Building Rapport



Building Rapport at the beginning of an interview is an important part of a successful interview. A good empathy interview should feel more like a conversation. You are aiming to get your interviewee to be comfortable enough to open up and learn new things during the process.

Some key tips:

The interviewee is the expert: Let them know that they are the expert in their own experience so whatever they think/feel is helpful for you to hear.

Introductions and context: Be sure to give time for introductions from both interviewers and interviewee. Also be sure to provide context as to why you interviewing them and how the interview will be used.

Start with easy questions: Start with easy and fun questions to get them talking before jumping into the more difficult/controversial questions.

Answer their questions: Give them a chance to ask any questions they may have about the process before getting started.

The goal of an empathy interview is for both the interviewee and the interviewer to learn something new and the more comfortable everyone is, the smoother the interview.

“ Capturing Quotes ”



Your Name	
Interviewer Name	
Interviewee <i>name, title/role, other key info</i>	

Verbatim Notes and Quotes:

Question #1:

Answer:



“ Capturing Quotes ”



Critical Quotes

What are the top 3 - 5 quotes that stand out to you? Write them here.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Key Insights

What are the top 3 - 5 insights from the interview? Write them here.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.





Interview Transcriptions

Benefits of transcription

Cambiar can provide transcription services free of charge.

As an empathy interview best practice, recording interviews is the best way to ensure that you are capturing verbatim quotes. Taking handwritten notes in the course of an interview can be tedious, especially when you are tasked with capturing the exact words. Additionally, taking breaks to physically write something down or following up for clarity on exact words can make the interview feel more like a diagnostic than conversation. With a transcript in-hand you can quickly navigate to relevant parts of the interview and simply copy/paste any important quotes or stories.

Another key benefit of a transcript is written feedback. As you and your team develop interviewing skills and techniques, a design coach can review your transcript and provide targeted advice on how to improve your line of questioning, and approach to following up.

How to capture a quality recording

If your organization does not have handheld recorders, almost any smartphone can produce a quality recording. There are a few suggested apps in the Empathy Interview Checklist, but any reputable app from the Google Play or Apple iTunes store should suffice.

Before recording an interview on a smartphone, do a test run to see how loudly you need to speak in order to produce a clear recording. For older model smartphones, it may be prudent to “pass the mic” back and forth, speaking directly into the smartphone in order to make sure everything is captured. Crucially, it is important to have limited background noise --interruptions are bound to occur in any busy school or office space, but your interview should occur in a place that is quiet and private as possible. Not only is this good for the recording, but it makes it easier for the interviewee to open up.

Cambiar does not recommend conducting interviews over the phone because of variability in cellular service and landline phone quality. If done remotely, we recommend using Zoom video conferencing which has a built-in recording feature (this is the preferred method for remote interviews conducted by Cambiar).

Empathy Interviews: Pre-Checklist



Use this checklist to make sure that you and your team are prepared to conduct high-quality empathy interviews. As a best practice, each team member should choose 1-2 [Empathy Do's and Don'ts](#) to focus on during their interviews. The “Do's and Don'ts” provide a set of habits that the team can reflect on and share successes/challenges, in order to make future interviews more consistent and/or focused.

SCHEDULING AND ORGANIZING INTERVIEWS

- ❑ Setup a spreadsheet to keep track of your interviewees and interview times. Most importantly, you want to assign an ID to each interviewee (e.g. '01'). You should also capture important details like interview time, and interviewee name and email. You can use this [template](#) or create your own.
- ❑ Setup an 'Admin' folder in Google Drive (or whatever cloud service is used in your system). Move the tracker spreadsheet (from previous step) into the 'Admin' folder. Inside the 'Admin' folder, create another folder named 'Consent Forms' --this is where you can upload any consent forms that are collected from interviewees.
- ❑ Setup a 'Design' folder in Google Drive (or whatever cloud service is used in your system). Inside the 'Design' folder, create additional folders for each interview ID. For example, the folder name for your first interviewee would be '01'. Any notes or recordings for the interview with ID #01 should be saved to this folder.
- ❑ Create a copy of the [Interview Data Survey](#) and place it inside of the 'Design' folder. This is where team members can submit key quotes and stories that they pull from interview notes, recordings or transcripts
- ❑ Share access to the 'Design' folder with your team and ensure that everyone on the team knows to upload notes and recordings under the respective folder ID.

BACKGROUND SCRIPT AND CONSENT FORMS

- ❑ Update the following script to reflect the purpose of your empathy interviews. (This will be read at the beginning of every interview conducted by your team.)

This interview is being conducted to help [school system name] understand the feelings, thoughts, behaviors and motivations around [topic you are exploring]. I will be following a general set of open-ended questions that probe for current stories and experiences around supporting student needs. You may hear me asking “Why?” or “Tell me more...” so that you have an opportunity to expand on your thoughts and statements. You may decline to answer or ask me to rephrase a question at any point.

The information gathered from this interview may be included anonymously in a report that may be shared within the district and at conferences or district-related meetings. Nothing that you say will ever be directly attributed to you at any point beyond this interview. Your name, email, and professional role will only be used to

Empathy Interviews: Pre-Checklist



schedule and track interviews, but otherwise, all personally identifiable information will remain confidential and separate from the analysis, synthesis and creation of information included in any materials.

- ☐ Collect a signed copy of the Cambiar consent form prior to conducting an interview, if any of the following apply:
 - Cambiar is using interview data collected by the district design team to produce documents or artifacts *that are intended for consumption by others than district employees.*
 - Cambiar is conducting interviews and collecting interview data on behalf of the district design team, especially and non-negotiably for interviews with minors.
- ☐ If applicable, choose the consent form that best suits your needs:
 - Cambiar Consent Form for Minors
 - Cambiar Consent Form for Non-Minors
 - Cambiar Passive Consent Form

CAPTURING NOTES AND RECORDING



Option A Verify that every district design team member has a way to record their interview. Where possible, ensure that interviews can be conducted in a quiet location. If using video conferencing, recording may be a built-in feature. Otherwise, for in-person interviews, a laptop program, handheld recorder or smartphone app ([iOS](#) or [Android](#)) will work.

Under this approach, interviewers are expected to be active listeners and bookmark the minutes and seconds when they hear an interesting quote --a story, belief, motivation or feeling expressed. They can then go back and listen or read a transcript to capture verbatim quotes from the interviewee.

Option B Create an interview guide from the Capturing Notes and Quotes template to take detailed notes and write down verbatim quotes that stand out. Agree as a design team to take clear writing notes and verify verbatim quotes..

Empathy Interviews: Pre-Checklist



INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

Read all steps before conducting an interview. You may print a copy of this checklist for each member of the design team.

- ☐ Ensure you have the right set of interview questions to ask
- ☐ Choose 1-2 [Empathy Do's and Dont's](#) to focus on building your interview skills.
- ☐ Verbally confirm receipt of consent release form, if applicable.
- ☐ Verbally confirm permission to record the interview, if applicable.
- ☐ Verbally communicate that you will not be using any PII during recording.
- ☐ Take time to establish rapport and “flatten the hierarchy” before recording starts.
- ☐ Start recording and read opening script

This interview is being conducted to help [school system name] understand the feelings, thoughts, behaviors and motivations around [topic you are exploring]. I will be following a general set of open-ended questions that probe for current stories and experiences around supporting student needs. You may hear me asking “Why?” or “Tell me more...” so that you have an opportunity to expand on your thoughts and statements. You may decline to answer or ask me to rephrase a question at any point.

The information gathered from this interview may be included anonymously in a report that may be shared within the district and at conferences or district-related meetings. Nothing that you say will ever be directly attributed to you at any point beyond this interview. Your name, email, and professional role will only be used to schedule and track interviews, but otherwise, all personally identifiable information will remain confidential and separate from the analysis, synthesis and creation of information included in any materials.

- ☐ Make sure to follow up with “Why?” or “Tell me more...” in order to understand root causes or underlying feelings/beliefs.
- ☐ Capture notes and bookmark any interesting comments.
 - If recording, write down the minute and second mark of any quotes that you want to capture verbatim.
 - If note-taking, pause to write detailed notes before moving to the next question
- ☐ Stop recording and thank the interviewee for their time/ask if they have any questions
- ☐ Upload recording and notes you took to the appropriate folder ID in your team’s ‘Design’ folder.
- ☐ Review your interview notes and/or listen to bookmarked quotes. . Look for the following indicators when selecting quotes:
 - ☐ Did the interviewee share a story or example?
 - ☐ Did the interviewee express a strong emotion or point of view?
 - ☐ Did the interviewee express surprise?
 - ☐ Did the interviewee share anything unexpected (on your or their part)?

Empathy Interviews: Pre-Checklist



- ☐ Did the interviewee suggest or mention any current or potential solutions to the related topic (or another problem articulated by the interviewee)?
- ☐ If possible, filter down to 5-7 verbatim quotes and stories that accurately reflect the entire interview.
- ☐ Submit your quotes and stories using the Interview Data Survey

Sample Language to Recruit Design Team



Hi [name] -

I'd like to extend an invitation to a small "design" team that I'm forming as part of the work for my Broad Academy Fellowship.

As a member of the design team, you will be performing empathy interviews with students, teachers, parents, and/or community members to collect authentic stories around their experiences with education and with [organization/district name].

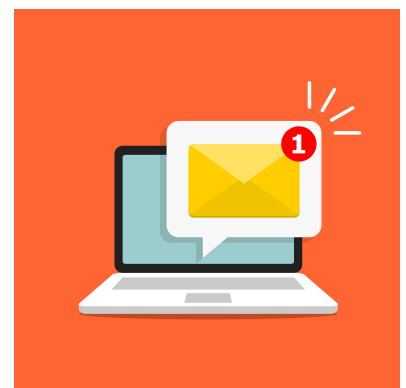
Your commitment will be a total of 10-12 hours over the next two months, as you conduct 4-6 interviews and participate in the design team check-ins.

We are fortunate to have some amazing support in this endeavor. Professional designers will work with us to develop open-ended, unbiased questions, and provide light coaching to help the team establish interview best practices.

It's my hope that we can use this opportunity to professionally develop our inquiry skills, engage some of our constituents who have not been traditionally well-acknowledged, and understand how our work aligns with some of the deeper needs that I hope we can uncover from our students, teachers, parents and community.

Please let me know your willingness to join the team by [deadline date].

Sincerely,
[your name]





Scoping Empathy Interviews

Estimate the scope of your interviews by looking at the complexity of your project. If the project is straightforward (e.g. give teachers more PL time for HS STEM instruction), then there may be few perspectives that deviate from expectations, for example:

- self-sufficient at PL
- not willing to learn something new
- not excited about PL options

In this case, a bare minimum of 15 interviews may be enough to gain at least one new insight about PL time in HS STEM instruction.

A broad and complex (e.g. increase student engagement) may have many “extreme” perspectives among students, for example:

- excel in everything but school
- doesn't care about school
- takes ownership of school culture
- represents school counterculture
- not sure how to engage or self-advocate
- has/n't faith that school is helpful and productive

These perspectives must also be considered against those of parents, teachers, principals and others who experience outcomes or take approaches to student engagement that deviate from expectations. In this case at least 50 interviews would be necessary to make sure any insights are informed by multiple perspectives across multiple stakeholder groups.

Use the flowchart below as a mental model. If the project has more than five stakeholder groups, focus on specific categories within groups (e.g. grade levels), or narrow the topic (e.g. increasing student engagement vs. supporting disengaged high schoolers). You can interview new or more stakeholder groups in the future, if needed.

Also consider the time that your team will commit to the project. For comparison, a 6-person team conducting 15 interviews over three weeks would require each member to devote a little more than two hours each week, not including scheduling overhead. Fifty interviews over a three-week period would require each team member to devote about seven hours each week.



Scoping Empathy Interviews

