Focus Groups

A Focus Group is a moderated group discussion, typically involving 5–8 participants, that is used to explore opinions, needs, experiences, and reactions to a particular topic. The value of the method lies not only in individual responses but also in the interaction between participants, which often reveals shared perspectives, differing viewpoints, and underlying motivations.

Participation Depth	Inform
Project Phase	Onboarding
Goals	Understanding & Gathering Perspectives
Format	Analogue
Duration	1 - 3 Hours
Target Group	Directly Affected
Group Size	Small Group up to 15, Medium Group up to 30
Characteristics	Simple, Structured

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The goal of a Focus Group is to explore different perspectives and experiences and use them as a basis for developing or improving projects, services, or measures. The discussion helps identify both common ground and differing viewpoints while exploring participants' willingness to support or develop potential solutions.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Select participants

Recruit 6–12 participants.

Whenever possible:

- select participants with similar backgrounds or experiences related to the topic
- avoid significant power imbalances (for example, supervisors and employees in the same group)

2. Prepare the discussion guide

A well-structured discussion guide typically includes:

Introduction (Warm-up) "Please tell us briefly about your most recent experience with…"

Exploration "What worked well?", "What frustrated you?"

In-depth discussion "Why do you think that happened?", "What exactly was difficult?"

Comparison and prioritisation "Which would be more important to you: X or Y?", "What would you change first?"

Guidelines:

- prepare no more than 6–8 core questions
- ask open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions
- avoid leading questions such as "Don't you agree that…?"

3. Organisational setup
Plan the following:

- Duration: 60–90 minutes
- Venue: quiet and neutral
- Recording: audio or video recording with participants' informed consent
- Participant incentive: if appropriate

Execution

1. Facilitation in practice
The facilitator remains neutral while actively guiding and structuring the discussion.

The facilitator's role is not to participate in the discussion, evaluate opinions, or act as the subject expert.

Facilitation techniques

Managing dominant participants "Thank you. I'd also like to hear some other perspectives."

Encouraging quieter participants "What's your perspective on this?", "Have you had similar experiences?"

Encouraging deeper responses "Why exactly?", "Could you give a specific example?"

Repeated follow-up questions often help uncover deeper insights.

Reflecting responses "So, if I understand correctly, you're saying that…"

Using differing opinions "That's interesting—you seem to have different perspectives. What do you think explains that difference?"

2. Typical process
Welcome and introduction (5 minutes)

Warm-up (10 minutes)

Main discussion (40–60 minutes)

1. Opening the discussion

The facilitator introduces the first question or statement. Each participant is initially invited to respond.

2. Group discussion

Participants then engage in an open discussion. They are encouraged to comment on one another's ideas, add further perspectives and reconsider or refine their own views as the discussion develops

3.In-depth exploration

If time allows, several questions or topics can be discussed one after another.

4. Summary and final reflections (10–15 minutes)

The facilitator summarises the discussion and invites participants to share any final thoughts or observations.

Evaluation

1. Structure the data
Prepare:

- a transcript or detailed notes
- thematic clusters, such as: usability, trust, time and effort

2. Identify patterns
Look for:

- recurring themes ("This issue was mentioned five times.")
- strong emotional responses
- contradictions and differing opinions, which often provide valuable insights

3. Extract key quotations
Record particularly clear or representative quotations.

These are valuable for:

-

communicating findings

- supporting recommendations
- illustrating participant perspectives

4. Develop recommendations
Avoid reporting only observations.

For example, instead of writing:

"Participants found the process complicated."

Develop actionable conclusions, such as:

- The onboarding process is too long and should be simplified.
- Feature X is not well understood and should either be redesigned or better explained.

Source: https://mobilitaetsplanung-hessen.de/methodenkoffer-partizipative-planung/

WHEN USEFUL?

- opinions, perceptions, or needs should be explored
- early hypotheses need to be investigated
- understanding how people respond to one another is important
- the topic benefits from discussion, such as user experiences or service interactions

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- sensitive or highly personal topics are being explored (individual interviews are usually more appropriate)
- representative or statistically valid data is required
- strong hierarchies exist between participants, as these may influence the discussion

TIPS

- Aim for a diverse participant group to capture a broad range of experiences and perspectives.
- Ideally, participants should not know each other well in order to minimise group dynamics and social influence.
- Formulate open, accessible, and non-leading questions. Fewer in-depth questions generally produce richer insights than many superficial ones.

- Encourage respectful dialogue and prevent individual participants from dominating the discussion.
- Whenever possible, avoid using microphones so that all participants feel equally involved.
- Actively manage speaking time to ensure everyone has an opportunity to contribute.
- Critically reflect on participants' responses and be aware of potential social desirability bias.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- formal decision-making processes where clear majorities are required
- situations in which concrete decisions or formal resolutions are expected
- very large groups
- venues with poor acoustics or limited audibility

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/fokusgruppen