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Transfer of knowledge and methodology to analyse the labour market

Outcome 2.1

Development of educational materials

THE FOCUS GROUP

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THE FOCUS GROUP

The topics that will be examined:

1. What is a focus group.
2. When to use it.
3. The method.
4. The participants:
 - 4.1. The selection of participants.
 - 4.2. Homogeneous or heterogeneous group?
5. The moderator and the observer.
6. The phases of the focus group:
 - 6.1. Planning and preparation.
 - 6.2. Management.
 - 6.3. Data recording and analysis.
 - 6.4. Reporting.
7. The draft of the questionnaire.
8. The setting.
9. Advantages and disadvantages of the focus group.

1. What is a focus group

- The focus group consists of an in-depth interview with a small number of people carefully selected and brought together to discuss a pre-established topic and to bring out spontaneous opinions and points of view.
- The focus group is a technique used to acquire information on opinions and attitudes, therefore, with the use of this technique qualitative data are obtained.

2. When to use it

Particularly effective tool:

- to analyse the needs of a context, organisation or institution,
- to activate participatory processes,
- to facilitate learning processes,
- to assess the impact of a service or project.

3. The method

- Focus group participants usually range from a minimum of 4/6 to a maximum of 10/12.
- The focus group should not last less than 90 minutes and no longer than 120 minutes.
- The discussion takes place in the presence of a moderator (possibly accompanied by an observer).

4. The participants

The participants (privileged witnesses) are people who are recognised as having a particular knowledge and/or competence on the topic and a particular ability to interpret facts.

4.1. The selection of participants

- The focus group represents a qualitative technique, so it is not necessary to select a probability sample.
- A judgment sampling (not probabilistic) is used.

4.2. Homogeneous or heterogeneous group?

Literature is divided: it is necessary that all subjects have something to say on the topic, but it is not said that they should have the same level of experience or be bearers of the same point of view.

Homogeneous group:

Advantages:

- Greater openness.
- Richer communication flow.

Disadvantages:

- Conformism.

Heterogeneous group:

Advantages:

- Wealth of points of view.

Disadvantages:

- Embarrassment.
- Conflict.

Some indications:

- In general, the homogeneity of the group is preferable (avoiding those conditions that could hinder communication and inhibit the intervention of some people), as long as it is not excessively homogeneous.
- However, it is important to take into account characteristics such as age, educational qualifications, profession and, more generally, characteristics that determine different statuses (these are characteristics that could hinder communication and inhibit the intervention of some people).
- Participants should not know each other (it favours a wider and freer communication).
- Participation should be voluntary (motivation is very important).
- A useful strategy can be to use segmentation (managing more focus with homogeneous groups within and heterogeneous among them).

5. The moderator and the observer

The focus group is managed by an experienced moderator who guides the discussion by encouraging comments and the expression of opinions and tries to involve people. In practice, the task of the moderator is to facilitate the discussion.

The **moderator** must:

- know the topic and prepare a guide/draft of the focus group,
- facilitate a stimulating discussion without losing sight of the objective,
- show enthusiasm to capture the interest of the group,
- maintain control of the group without influencing the participants.

The **observer** (or assistant) does not intervene in the discussion but:

- observes the group dynamics,
- takes notes on the issues that have emerged,
- helps the moderator in the management of the practical aspects (recorder, use of blackboards, etc.),
- collaborates in the drafting of the final report.

6. The phases of the focus group

The phases of a focus group are:

1. Planning and preparation.
2. Management.
3. Data recording and analysis.
4. Report.

6.1. Planning and preparation

The planning and preparation of the focus group consists in:

- Definition of objectives.
- Identification and selection of participants (including the moderator and the observer).
- Identification of the setting (where to manage the focus group and how to organize the spaces).
- Definition of the focus group draft.

To invite participants is a good practice to:

- Send an invitation letter (e-mail, fax, ...) presenting the survey, the objectives, the use of data and the date, time and place of the focus and the contact details.
- Contact them by telephone to check their willingness to participate and to provide further clarification.
- Contact them, always by phone, one or two days before the focus to remember the event.

6.2. Management

The focus group is divided into two phases:

- Reception and warm-up.
- Discussion and conclusions.

6.2.1. Reception and warm-up

1. The moderator introduces himself to the group and illustrates:
 - The reason why people have been convened (a topic on which the focus group will focus).
 - The objectives of the research.
 - How people were selected.
 - The rules of the focus.
 - The duration of the session.
2. The moderator asks the participants to introduce themselves to the group.

In this first phase it is important to put participants at ease and establish a climate of trust and spontaneity.

6.2.2. Discussion and conclusions

The discussion is structured in:

1. **Introduction questions:** allow participants to enter the topic in a soft way (they can be accompanied by visual or audiovisual stimuli or be replaced with small exercises) promoting individual reflection.
2. **Transition questions:** allow the transition to the key questions; people become aware of the point of view of others and deepen individual reflection.
3. **Key or substantive questions:** these are the salient questions for the purposes of the survey.
4. **Final questions:** these are tools for synthesis and verification of the work carried out, which allow further clarification. The moderator's feedback and the valorisation of the contribution offered by the group find space.

Answers can be given:

- Orally.
- By written technique ("pieces of paper method" allows to clarify thoughts and allows the most shy people to express themselves as opinions are written on paper and then read and discussed in groups).

6.3. Data recording and analysis

It is good practice to record the discussion (participants must be asked for permission) it is, however, essential that the observer (if present) takes notes.

The information collected with the focus group is suitable to a purely qualitative analysis. For this reason it is a good rule to:

- transcribe the interview faithfully,
- identify the topics detected,
- unify the topics into categories,
- discuss and interpret the results,
- take into account the comments of the moderator and the observer,
- evaluate the results.

6.4. Report

The final report of a focus group consists of an elaboration that illustrates and summarizes the information collected, according to the set objectives.

7. The draft of the questionnaire

- The focus group question grid is designed to direct the discussion.
- The guidelines are generally made up of a few open-ended questions that should not be ambiguous and should not suggest the answer.
- In constructing the grid, two basic principles are followed (which reflect what has been illustrated in the management of the focus group):
 - starting with the more general questions and gradually moving on to the more specific ones,
 - order the questions according to their importance, in relation to the purpose of the discussion.

8. The setting

- The focus group should be organized as far as possible in a symbolic place (an institutional seat, a suggestive place, ...), easy to reach, easily accessible, comfortable and spacious.
- The room should be organised in such a way that the participants (including the moderator and observer) can be arranged in a circle so that everyone can look each other in the face.
- The room should be equipped with a fixed or mobile blackboard, especially if you decide to adopt the written technique (pieces of paper method) as a way of answering questions.
- Each participant (including the moderator and the observer) must have his own place card indicating his first and last name.

9. Advantages and disadvantages of the focus group

Advantages

- Flexibility.
- Quantity and quality of information (the food for thought "produced" in a group context is more and deeper thanks to the exchange and interaction between participants).
- Does not require the use of complex sampling techniques.
- Reduced implementation time and costs.

Disadvantages

- You can't generalize the results.
- The quality of the data is influenced by the skill and motivation of the moderator.
- The results obtained through the use of this technique is suitable to a purely qualitative analysis (in essence the participants' sentences and behaviours are used to answer the research questions).