Focus Groups: Key Points

When to Use: When you want discussion amongst participants to provide useful information, i.e., their comments prompt others to agree, disagree, expand, etc. Don’t need in-depth information from each member. Purposes: To learn of needs, perceptions, experiences, reactions of members.

Key points:

Size: 6-8 (recruit slightly more)
Atmosphere: comfortable, coffee club, discussion
Characteristics: Best if participants do not know each other
Group should be homogeneous; you can have different groups to capture different characteristics. Heterogeneous groups or knowing others in the group can inhibit or bias discussion.

Leader’s role: Facilitator. Asks questions, encourages quiet participants to talk, encourages “noisy” ones to be quiet a bit, does not reveal own points of view or any background information other than purpose of project and credentials. Why? You don’t want the facilitator’s points to view of influence or silence points of view expressed by participants.

Potential problems: Group think: Minority afraid to disagree. If you think it is occurring, try “I’ve heard that some people think . . . . (opposite view). Do you or friends of yours think that?”

Domination by few people: “Thanks, Sherry. Can I hear from some of the rest of you on this issue?” . . .

Some not talking: “Susie, what do you think about X? What have your experiences been?”

Length of time: approximately 90 minutes
Approximate number of questions: 8-12
Questions are open-ended. Start with safe questions. Have people introduce themselves (first names) and tell something about themselves (not too private, e.g., how long they’ve lived in Denver).

Be prepared to use pauses (don’t talk too much) and probes (tell me more about why you feel that way?).

Summarize at end: I’d just like to summarize some of the key points you’ve made and some of the differing views and get your feedback as to whether I’ve taken it all in correctly.

End of summary. What do you think? Have I identified the key issues? Have I missed some important issues?
Focus Group Protocol

Thanks.

The project is funded by a grant with the Women’s Foundation of Colorado to study opportunities for women in the high tech field. Many of you completed the survey we’re conducting with men and women in high-tech industries and another with HR directors.

Today, I’d like to talk with you a little about your own careers and your work place, what works well for you, what doesn’t. But, let me tell you a little bit about myself first. I’m a professor at CU. I’m working on this project as an independent consult. I am not affiliated with any high-tech industry or group.

I am tape recording the discussion so I can listen to it later, but no one else but myself will have access to this tape. So, please be frank and honest. Your remarks will help The Women’s Foundation and the Governor’s office to make the high-tech environment a great place for women.

Intro: Go around and introduce yourself and tell how long you’ve worked in the high-tech sector and what you do now. You don’t need to name your organization, just what you do.

1. What first led you to work in the high-tech sector? (Probe: What was appealing? exciting about it? money, growth, challenge, nature of the work, opportunities for advancement?)

2. What have you liked most about your work in high-tech?

   Least?

3. How satisfied are you with your job? Would you choose to work in the same field again?

   What are some of the factors that influence your job satisfaction? (Work itself, recognition, supervision, opportunities for advancement, freedom/flexibility, pay/benefits, colleagues?)

4. Do you think there are good opportunities for women in high-tech?

   What problems, if any, do you think women encounter in the high-tech environment? (Glass ceiling, technical areas?)

   What are the drawbacks for women working in high-tech?
5. When there is a highly visible, important job to be assigned in your organization (unit) do you think it’s more likely to go to a man than a woman? Why or why not?

6. What advice would you give to a woman starting work in the high-tech sector?
ALUMNAE FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

BEFORE OFFICIAL START:

- As women arrive, give them a consent form and ask them to read it and sign if they’re willing to participate. Let them know you can answer any questions they have.

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon. Thanks for coming today. I’m __________________________ (NAME OF LEADER) and this is __________________________(NAME), a research assistant on this study. I am a professor at the University of Colorado at Denver and I’ve received a grant from the Colorado Institute of Technology to study women in IT in Colorado. We want to learn more about what prompts women to pursue careers in IT and how they feel about their education and their work.

I am not affiliated with any high-tech industry or group. You’re the experts here. I want to learn about your experiences in IT. We’re going to talk for about an hour and a half. I’m just the moderator. I’ll ask questions, but I’d like to get a good discussion going. If you disagree with everyone else, speak up. Your experiences may reflect those of many other people in IT.

Your remarks, however, are confidential. We will be tape-recording the session to help us remember the important points you make, but only my two assistant researchers and I will have access to this tape. No names will be linked with remarks in our research. Confidentiality is important. We ask that you maintain the confidentiality of everyone here and not repeat any comments that were made at this focus group after it is completed.

So, please be open and honest with us. Your comments will help the Colorado Institute of Technology and educational institutions in the state to improve their IT programs for women like you.

Are there any questions? PAUSE.

INTRODUCTIONS:

Let’s begin by going around the room and introducing yourselves. Why don’t you tell us who you are, the program you graduated from, and what you do now?

*There are many different degree programs and careers in computing. For the sake of simplicity, we have used the term IT as an umbrella term for all of the programs and fields (computer science, computer information systems, etc.) that may lead to jobs in the information technology sector.
II: CHOOSING IT

Now, take a moment to think back to when you decided to pursue a career in IT. PAUSE.

1. What prompted you to consider IT?
   PROBE: When did you first begin thinking of IT as a possible career for you?

2. What experience did you have with technology before starting the program at __________(NAME OF INSTITUTION)?
   PROBE: Did you have experience using computers prior to this program? At home? School? Work?

3. Before starting this program, did you know anyone who worked in the IT field?
   PROBES: If so, what kind of work did he or she do? Was it someone you were close to? How did that person’s work influence your choice?

4. Did anyone encourage you to pursue a career in IT?
   PROBES: Teachers, advisors, parents, friends?
   If so, what was your relationship to this person and how did they encourage you?

5. Did anyone encourage you to pursue a career in math or science?

5. What were your experiences with math and science in high school? Did you like it? Did you feel you did well at it?

6. Did you enroll here right after high school? If not, what did you do before coming here? What prompted you to return to school?

8. What other careers did you consider before choosing in IT?

Let’s talk a minute about why you chose__________ (NAME OF INSTITUTION).

9. What prompted you to consider _______________ (NAME OF INSTITUTION)?
   PROBE: How had you heard of_____ (NAME OF INSTITUTION)?
10. Did you consider other schools? What made you choose____________ (NAME OF INSTITUTION) in the end?

III. PROGRAM EXPERIENCES:

Now, let’s talk a bit about your experiences in the program.

1. What do you think of the program? PROBES: Was it like what you thought it would be like? How? How was it different?

1. Did you ever feel uncomfortable being a woman in the program? Tell me about that.

2. Do you think you were treated differently than guys in the program? If yes, how are you treated differently? Who treated you differently (faculty, students)?

3. Do you feel the program prepared you for what you do now?

4. What else could the program have done that would have helped you?

    PROBES: Internships, tougher classes, more practical or more theoretical content, help with looking for jobs or applying to four-year schools.

5. Looking back, what part of the program was most helpful to you now?

6. What part was least helpful?

IV. WORKPLACE/EDUCATION

1. The IT field has been pretty tough lately. For those of you working in IT, how did you find your job?

2. Are you doing what you hoped you would do?

3. How satisfied are you with your job?

4. What’s the best part of your work?

5. The worst part?

6. Do you feel you’re treated differently as a woman in your organization? IF YES, how? Who treats you differently?

7. Do you think you will continue your education at some point in time?
8. For those of you in school, what prompted you to continue on?

9. How did you choose your school?

10. Are you still in IT?

   IF NOT, why did you change?

11. If you were starting to college again, would you still choose IT? Why? Why not?

Thank you all for taking the time to share your experiences! Good luck to you in the future!
Focus Group Report: 
Women Professionals in High-Tech

Number of Participants: 9

Description of Participants: Participants included nine women ranging in age from their 20’s to 50’s, though most were in their 30’s and 40’s. All but one had at least a bachelor’s degree; the exception had a professional-technical position achieved with training and some college. All were Caucasian and worked in the tech center area, though their residences ranged from Douglas County to Boulder. Most were married with children, though two were younger and single and one had grown children. One was self-employed, but had been previously employed by a large firm in the high-tech industry. Most worked for large organizations.

Summary of Discussion

None of the participants were traditionally-trained for high-tech jobs. Instead, they entered the career almost by accident. However, they love their work. They enjoy the challenge, the variety, and the opportunities to enhance other people’s work through their actions. They felt problem-solving skills and logic they had gained in college and curiosity and initiative were important characteristics for high-tech employees. Their primary complaint was rapid turnover in supervisors; some reported working more hours than they preferred. They reported experiencing no gender bias in their work and felt the flexibility their jobs offered (flexible hours and opportunities to work from home) were good for women and families. They felt the labor shortage was such that if women were working part-time in high-tech, it was at their own volition, and they noted they knew many women who would like to work part-time. All would choose the same line of work again; several regretted they had not discovered it sooner. Suggestions for encouraging more women to pursue careers in high-tech included helping parents, girls, and high school and college advisors know more about the real world of high-tech, emphasizing the skills necessary rather than the traditional math-science disciplines for entry, focusing on the impact such jobs have on the lives of people, and developing computer toys such as Barbie digital cameras that appealed to girls’ desire to express themselves. They noted that women bring an important practical focus to the high-tech world.

What led you to pursue career in high-tech?

None of the women in the group had an educational background that led to jobs in high-tech nor had they considered this arena as a goal. One woman was an engineer, with a degree in math, but the remainder had majored in fields quite removed from the math-science disciplines, e.g., early childhood education, aviation management, English, philosophy, and sports management. But, as one of the participants remarked, they knew few people who worked in the areas in which they had received their degrees. Several (those in English and philosophy) noted that their education did help prepare them for problem solving, writing and logic types of tasks that they performed. Most had taken their initial job in high-tech for economic or unplanned reasons;
they sometimes considering it temporary, but, finding opportunities and interesting tasks, had stayed on for a career.

Sample quotes:

*I graduated with a degree in creative writing and a minor in philosophy, and I never really left that either. I found a lot of application for symbolic logic in what I do every day. When I was coming up through college I was scared off of math. But I did get a job in telecommunications as a tech writer and then found myself spending a lot of time on the floor with engineers going, “What’s this?” because I’m nosy and it was fun.*

*I started as a computer operator while I was a single mom because it paid well. I’ve moved up with a normal flow of promotions. IT’s paid off for me all the way around. I’ve been to college, but I’ve never finished. I’ve had all the computer courses I need. Most companies do require people with a degree, but I’ve worked my way up, but I always have to prove myself because I don’t have a degree.*

*After I graduated (degree in English) I had no idea of what I was going to do. I knew I liked to write. I could not imagine what people did out there in terms of writing. After I graduated, I got a job that I wasn’t very happy with and I called [a friend who worked as a supervisor in technical writing] and she offered me a job. I just couldn’t believe it. I loved it.*

*I don’t think I would have ever chosen to go into high-tech. I had just finished my undergraduate degree in philosophy . . . and was planning on going to law school. For the summer, I got a job at a company doing customer support, writing documentation, and taking a little role in design and just never ended up going to law school . . . Law school was so concrete. All the high-tech stuff was so blurry. It’s not easy to describe to people what we do.*

*I got my degree in aviation management. It helped me get into a company and gave me a technical background, but the aviation company was so dominated by men . . . I could not move at that company . . . I finally left for high-tech, graphic design . . . You don’t have to have technical background, but having a degree helps.*

*All the time growing up, through grade school, high school, community college I knew I would do something with math . . . I was the first born and a girl . . . My father always encouraged me to do things like a first-born son. I got my degree in math and after I got out of college I wanted some way to apply it. I actually applied to a high-tech company for an assistant position, but they saw my degree in math and moved me into a technical engineering position.*

**What have you liked most about your work in high-tech?**

Participants in the group liked different aspects of their work. They focused very much on the tasks themselves and found them fun, challenging, and diverse. Most didn’t like the public perception that high-tech people didn’t work with people; several emphasized their work was to help people. One commented that high-tech is diverse; it requires many different types of people who like different things. Some like to work alone; some with people, but all seemed to like the
challenge, the tasks themselves, and the environment. The group was, in fact, quite diverse in the tasks they performed on the job. One was a systems engineer, two were technical professionals in computer software, two were technical writers, one was in sales, and two consulted with others on designing and using computers. Most worked for relatively large companies; one was self-employed, though she had worked for a large company for many years.

Sample quotes:

I love the work. I love the fact that it changes every day. I love the types of people that I run into every day. I love the fact that almost everyone I talk to is incredibly diverse. That’s one of the things that I was thinking about is how many people do I know who actually have degrees in what they do? Hardly anyone. It’s really amazing to see people come from all different types of cultures and backgrounds and different education levels, and all come to love the same thing.

They [engineers] sort of invited me in to show me everything and it was the first time in my life that I had been accepted amongst people that I figured were my superiors without batting an eyelash and that’s been the case in my career. . . . But, it’s (the work) that’s really kept me going, and it doesn’t always come naturally for me. I have to study very hard. I haven’t gone back for any specialized degree training, but I have taken and been certified in a lot of different areas, which I think has helped since my degree is not in that area.

For me, the most rewarding piece is feeling like you’re really helping make someone else’s job easier that day.

This is a lot of fun. You don’t have to have technical background, but having a degree helps. I have many more opportunities than I had in aviation technology [which she experienced as male-dominated and biased against women].

I went with a large company because of the [training] opportunities it provided. I enjoy the challenge; I learn new thing every day. (a young woman in sales relatively new to high-tech, but wanted to go into technology)

A lot of the fun of it for me is that it [work] is constant puzzles and helping people do their jobs more easily.

What are the attributes of a good employee in high-tech?

I asked this unplanned question because several were focusing on the diversity of employees, yet there seemed to be underlying commonalities. They voiced these commonalities by citing curiosity, initiative, interest in learning and teaching themselves.

Sample quotes:

Innate curiosity [is the trait needed in high-tech employees]. The most successful people I know are the ones who look over my shoulder and say, “Cool! How did you do that?”
You need a lot of different types – some who like to work with people, others who want to work alone. You wouldn’t want them around clients, but there are just all different types of jobs out there that require all different types of people.

You have to be able to teach yourself new skills. Have to be able to pace yourself and be motivated to take on many different types of tasks.

**What are the down sides to working in the high-tech sector?**

This question did not prompt many comments. The two issues that were mentioned were turnover among their supervisors requiring them to re-educate each one about their work and, in some cases, too many hours. One had been in a job with excessive hours. Most reported they worked slightly more than a 40-hour week. Others remarked that they had made it clear that they would only work a “reasonable” number of hours and their desires were respected. In regard to the rapid turnover among supervisors, several reported their supervisors typically changed twice a year, with supervisors moving on to other companies or internal promotions.

To stimulate more discussion of disadvantages to working in the high-tech field, I listed a number of areas: recognition, supervision, opportunities for advancement, freedom/flexibility, pay/benefits, colleagues. None of these prompted remarks on problems. Participants in the focus group were very happy with their work and their selection of careers. Though one participant cited gender discrimination when she worked in the aviation industry, none saw their gender as a problem in their current jobs.

Sample comments:

[A downside is] companies changing a lot. There’s much turnover in bosses. Then, you have to work with them [the new bosses] to make sure they understand what you do, why it’s important.
The hours – even though my job is very flexible and I am capable of working at home, I actually had to give up a job a year ago because the hours were just insane and I wanted to be married for another 15 years! It was incredibly stupid – it was 100 hours a week. You just couldn’t keep that pace up. There was a lot of pressure on everybody to work a lot of hours because of deadlines. That’s the biggest thing for me and I can see it being an issue for a lot of people.

What are the opportunities for women in high-tech? How family-friendly are organizations?

Participants reported opportunities were great for women in high-tech. They had not encountered gender bias. Their hours were flexible and several had opportunities to work at home that provided additional flexibility. But, opportunities for part-time work were scarce. One participant worked part-time. She had negotiated this arrangement after working full-time for the company for quite a few years. At this point, she wanted to stay home some hours with her young children. When asked if women in high-tech were pushed into part-time jobs, the group unanimously indicated this was not the case. They reported the labor shortage made companies want every one they could get to work full-time. Several reported they would like to work part-time if they could and knew others for whom this was the case. So, part-time work by women in high-tech appeared to be a choice, not a sign of discrimination.

Sample comments:

I’m sure gender bias exists, but I have been very fortunate that I’ve not run into it.

I have flexibility with time and the advantage of working at home. I can take off at 2:30 to go get my daughter and then put in a couple of hours after she goes to bed. So, it’s just very flexible.

My company is very flexible. They keep track by your success. (sales)

I’m able to work at home and am negotiating some additional days to avoid a long commute to work.

For me, it’s a requirement to be part-time. I didn’t want to be full-time. I hear a lot of women who are in the same situation I’m in – have a couple of young kids – and almost all of them would prefer a part-time job. But, in a lot of other industries part-time jobs don’t pay enough to make it worth it. I think a lot of people would stick with a company because they gave them a part-time opportunity.

Everyone I know that works part-time could probably walk in and say, “I’d like to go full-time” and they would be put on immediately.

What can we do to encourage other women to pursue careers in high-tech?

Participants felt the high-tech world was a great place for women and strongly believed that more women should be encouraged to pursue careers in this sector. All indicated that they would pursue the same line of work if they had it to do again. Several felt they had been uninformed about the work world and what they could do with the skills they had gained in
their college education. In regard to high-tech jobs, participants believed parents, teachers, and the public know less about what people do in these fields because it is new and that it is difficult to describe the nature of the work. Among the suggestions they had for encouraging other women to pursue high-tech careers were: educating parents, high school and college advisors, and students themselves about what careers in high-tech are really like; recognizing that not all jobs in high-tech require high science and math skills; focusing on the impact high-tech work has on improving people’s jobs; Barbie digital cameras or other computer “toys” that appeal to girls’ interests; emphasizing the skills that high-tech work requires, not the discipline base. Many participants observed that women bring more practical skills to high-tech because they’re interested in the use of the product more than men tend to be.

Sample quotes:
If when I was in college I had had even one advisor suggest it, [I would have found this career more quickly], . . . . but I had not even a clue.

When you’re in liberal arts, they think you’re a lost cause. . . . Then, when I got out, that wasn’t the case. We should having people talk to girls about things they do in their work. . . . what the work world really is.

I’m not working with computers. I’m constantly thinking about the end user and applying it to the person who’s going to be using. Maybe that’s the difference between the boys and girls. The boy says, “I want to be an engineer,” and when you ask a girl, she says, “I want to do something concrete.” The boys want to “be something;” girls want to “do something.” Practical application is number one for the girls. When I talk to my daughter’s computer class the girls are constantly saying, “What do you do with this?” whereas the boys are interested in just mastering it without too much need for the practical application. The guys want to do things because “it’s cool.”

There are so many different types of people in high-tech. So to say that someone isn’t interested in high-tech because they don’t like computer science or engineering is just, you know, what happened to the rest of the industry?

I like the Barbie digital camera. That might make a difference to my daughter. It is a tool that you can use to express yourself.

You shouldn’t focus on the discipline. . . . You should focus on the skills that we bring – being able to work alone for a long time, or bringing logic skills, or people skills. Companies need many different skills in high-tech.