Capstone
Conducting and Writing Interviews

Intensive Interviews:

1. Develop introduction explaining your purpose and eliciting their participation. Briefly explain the purpose of the project and appeal to their expertise, experience, or knowledge as important for the study. Indicate who is sponsoring the study, i.e., your client or his or her organization, and how they will use it. If appropriate, tell them their comments are confidential or anonymous.

2. Develop the questions you will ask building from the research questions for your study. Don’t use yes-no questions unless yes or no is really the answer you want. Instead, use broader, more open-ended questions. (How questions, why questions, tell me about when . . . ) Consider whether you’re wanting to learn their opinion (What do you think of . . . ? Do your clients need more . . . ?) or their description of some action (can you tell me about how your agency began to use strategic planning. . . ? Do you recall when you first heard about it?)

Plan 5-10 questions for an interview of 30-45 minutes.

Write out your main questions.

Add possible probes:

   a. Reflecting on what they’ve just said and pausing: So, your organization began laying people off in January? . . . ;

   b. Specific probe (more specific question): Why did you wait until January?

   c. All-purpose probe: Can you tell me more about that?
d. Other: What do you mean by X (example: employee dissatisfaction)?

3. Consider how you will transcribe what they say. If you’re interviewing by phone, you might consider recording it or typing what they’re saying on the computer using a speaker phone to hear their comments. If you’re interviewing them in person, consider whether you want to record their remarks or not. If recording will inhibit what they say, don’t record it. But, don’t take extensive notes during the interview. If you’re interviewing them in person, your job is to make eye contact and look interested to prompt them to continue talking. You can jot down a few key words to remind yourself later. Then, immediately after you leave, take an hour to make detailed notes of what you learned.

4. Consider who you will interview. Don't interview the most important person first. Wait until you have more information from others. Similarly, don't leave those who may have different points of view until the end. You want to know their points of view, so you can ask others to respond to the issues they raise. Your first interviews should be concerned with gaining information and details for subsequent interviews, helping you learn what they’re thinking and beginning to consider hypotheses.

5. **Important issues:** During interview: do **not** interrupt, **do** make eye contact, look interested and understanding, do not judge what they are saying, don't be uncomfortable with silences, don’t put words in their mouths (say “could you expand on that”, or “tell me more about that,” but don't give them words). **The most common error a new interviewer makes is talking too much.** You want to hear
from them and not reveal too much of yourself or what you think of their comments. (Telling about yourself or your thoughts on their comments can bias the rest of the interview because they now know what you think.)
Introduction: thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me. I’m X (name) and, as you know, am conducting a project on X for (your client or name of agency). I would like to talk with you a little bit today on how your career in high tech. I am tape recording this interview, but it will only be heard by me. Your comments will be anonymous. No names will be used in the report. (Another option: I may use names or positions in the report with quotations from our interview to help the reader consider the context of the comments. In most cases, I will not. If I do identify some quotations from you, would you like to see them before the report is complete?)

I anticipate our interview will take a little less than an hour (or insert other time). Do you have any questions about the interview or the research before I begin?

Start:

I: First and Second Jobs

1. What was your first job in the high tech industry?
   Prompts: How did you learn of the position? Why did you apply? Did it sound appealing to you? What were your responsibilities?

2. How did you like that first job? (How supportive was your supervisor? Your co-workers? What kinds of things did you learn?)
3. Let me step back for a minute: What was your educational background and work experience before you started in this position? (Note: Too threatening to ask at beginning. Hold until now.)

4. OK, back to your career in high tech, how long did you stay in that first job? What was your next position? (Was it with the same organization? Was it a promotion? How was it different from your first position?)

II. High Tech Environment

Transition: Let’s talk a bit about how you have found the high-tech environment over your career.

1. Have you found your supervisors and co-workers to be supportive or your work? In what ways?

2. Can you tell me about a circumstance when a boss or supervisor was particularly supportive of your career?

3. Have you ever felt that you were being treated differently than men in your department or area? How? (More favorably, less favorably; what were the differences)

4. Can you tell me about a particular circumstance where you felt you were treated differently?

Etc.
Some sample questions to an administrator:

1. I understand you’re providing transportation vouchers to city employees. When did you start that program? (Safe question, see if he/she expands. If not, next.)

2. What prompted the city to start the program? (probes: Do you recall who initially suggested it? Were some people against it? Who? Who advocated for it?)

3. Do you think the program has been a success? (probes: Why? What indicates success? Probe for use, numbers, changes over time)

4. Have you made any changes in the program over time? (Probes: Why did you make those changes?)

5.
Sample report

In-Depth Interviews

The focus of the in-depth interviews was to learn more from women who had worked in high-technology for some time about their own career paths and choices, the opportunities they perceived for women in high-tech, and their suggestions for how to attract more women and girls to the field. Eight women, all of whom were top managers in their companies, were interviewed. One was the CEO; others were vice-presidents or other high-level executives. They had worked in technology for 15-30 years.

What led these women to high-tech and what were the factors contributing to their success?

Few of these women who had risen to high levels in the high-tech industry were traditionally trained though two of the youngest were educated as engineers and worked in that capacity upon entering the field. The others entered from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines. (This was also true of women in the focus group who were in lower-level professional positions.) For several of the top-level managers interviewed, their first positions were at a very entry level, e.g., customer service and file clerk. The commonality among these women was that, as they expressed, they entered a field that was new; areas of expertise and disciplines of knowledge were less defined. One told how she was hired by a fledgling CompuServe twenty years ago because she has worked in an emergency room and they felt that her experience with chaos in that environment would help in this new, undefined environment. One was recruited by the cable industry after years as a successful social worker doing community development; the cable industry initially wanted her community organizing and political skills. Of these women without technical backgrounds, only one pursued a technical degree during their career though they participated in training opportunities (especially those in computer industries, less so in telecommunications). Two had bachelor’s degrees in traditional areas (teaching and social work) and two completed their degrees in night programs after they began their careers. All but one were the first people in their family to attend college.

How did they rise? They acknowledged supportive bosses and environments that were new and changing, where expertise was not so much an issue as energy and drive. But, they also were hard-working, responsible women with perseverance, business-sense, curiosity, and ambition. More than one noted learning everything that came across her boss’s desk. In a rapidly-growing new industry, they were able to make their mark because the work was less defined and they were willing to work hard and learn much. They attributed their rise to their hard work and their willingness to take risks and try new things. They were also good with people, good facilitators and communicators, in an industry that needed those skills. Many enjoyed the excitement and change of the high-tech
environment. While ambitious, they did not have concrete career plans; they simply wanted to perform well in each job and look for promotions or opportunities. For one, geographic mobility was important. Another delayed her rise until her children were older and she could travel more. For most, geographic mobility was not an issue; they were able to rise while remaining in the same location. In contrast to the oft-heard lack of company loyalty among high-tech employees, these women were with the same company or only two companies over their entire career.

Sample quotes here are organized by first jobs, education, work environment, promotions, and traits and family influences.

Sample Quotes:

First jobs

I didn’t choose high-tech. In fact, I was recently on a panel for Women in Technology International (WITI) with prominent women in the high-tech industry and none of us had chosen it directly. All of them were like me. (2)

It took me a while to sort out my career options. By the time I finished [college], I knew I didn’t want to be a teacher, but I didn’t know what I wanted to do. So, I went to work for the phone company where my sister worked. I had quit college after the first year and worked there full-time for a semester. I then realized this wasn’t what I wanted to do the rest of my life and went back. But, when I graduated one of the men there had kept up with me and offered me a job. I was a customer representative, but I took the first management-sales position that came up. When I graduated, I had been looking for a business opportunity. (1)

I married right out of high school, had children, and worked. I was administrative assistant to the Secretary of Health in Pennsylvania. My husband was with [high-tech company where she is employed]. He was transferred to Detroit. So, I applied for a job there as an administrative assistant. [She’s now been with the company 26 years and is a VP]. (2)

I went to Ft. Wayne, Indiana to head a community organization. It was my dream job. It gave me activist experience and made me courageous. American Television and Communications (now Time-Warner) was in Ft. Wayne. They asked me to come work for them. I had been in Ft. Wayne for three years as a single mom with my son; I was divorced. But, it wasn’t the kind of place where I wanted to raise my son. I was invited out to Denver for an interview. They offered me a job and I said, “To do what?” Franchising! It was very political then. They wanted me to go into the community, to organize the community. I loved it! I never gave a thought to going back to social work. (3)
I saw an ad for a Network Administrator. I didn’t even know what it was, but applied. [divorced, young mother, had dropped out of college, was looking for stable work]. It was CompuServe. I got a job as a file clerk. They hired me because of my emergency room experience! They thought I would be able to cope in this changing environment. The head of the company was very inspiring about how computers would affect lives. [1977] (5)

This was a shock [not getting offer from company where she had summer job], so I went into overdrive. I talked to about 25 companies and took 12-13 plant trips. It set a record at Berkeley for job hunting! I got 13 offers. It was a very good learning experience seeing all the different companies. I had never even been on a plane before. All the interviews were helpful. I look back and realize I was pretty nervy. When I interviewed with [company] at Boulder I stayed at a hotel where many [company employees] stayed. I saw the name of a woman when I was registering so I called her room. She took me over to [the company] that night and showed me around. It made a big difference. I took the job. (4, engineering graduate)

Education

I was interested in math and science, but never encouraged in this area. I was from a blue-collar family. I was the first to ever go to college. I thought that education and nursing were the only jobs available for women. [1960’s]. I wasn’t interested in nursing, so I went the education route. I went to college at Wayne State in Detroit and lived at home. (1)

I was always good in math and science. I pursued these subjects to the highest level in high school. I was not sure what I wanted to do then. I thought maybe teaching math. In my freshman year at a junior college, a guidance counselor suggested I look at some catalogues on engineering after I had argued to take a math course for scientists and engineers rather than the one for teachers. After that, I switched to engineering. [went on to Berkeley for bachelor’s degree with three other women friends who chose engineering at the junior college] (4)

As a result of the race riot [in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the 1920’s], there was no integration in Tulsa. We were very segregated. This develops a certain kind of character [for African-Americans]. My teachers all had high expectations for all of them. They expected you to go to college – rich or poor. [and she did] (3)

I realized that [her company] was a technical company, and if I wanted to grow, I needed to be technical. I took on-line courses and was self-taught on technology initially. I finished my degree at DU Women’s College weekend program. (2)
I didn’t graduate from college the first time, but I finished later in an evening and Saturday program. It was very hard to balance work, family, and school. [first in her family to attend college]. (5)

There was no education stigma. Everyone was self-taught. (5)

Work Environment

I always had supportive bosses. They let me do more than my job required. (2)

I was very lucky. My [first] boss really liked to teach people. The only people who knew networking then were people who had worked for the government. There was no formal training. He was my boss for 12 years. . . . I took some hardware training, but my boss said you don’t want to crawl around on the floor. . . . Women have more administrative skills. It fell to me to organize the tasks. I was a good facilitator. (5)

The management training was very strong [in first job with large computer company]. My first boss was not very good, but the next one was. My co-workers were generally all male with a supportive manager. He would teach me the unwritten rules. That’s what you need. [from engineer] (4)

My first boss was very supportive. After that, I received more neutral reactions, especially from women, and a little resistance from men. Women don’t support each other as well as men do. (5)

I consider the culture in high-tech to be a positive. There is much change. But, there have been up’s and down’s. One difficulty is changes in bosses. In a little over a year, I have had seven different reporting relationships [with different bosses]. I haven’t had any advocates lately because of this lack of continuity. This has been a real detriment to me. I have been operating at a higher level, but haven’t gotten the recognition. (4)

I got into [first company where she was for 20 years] when it was new and networking was new. I knew everything because I had developed it. It was harder when I first came to [current company], I had to learn how they did things. But, an advantage is the company is young. I think I might not have been able to get a comparable job in a large company. (5)

It’s like Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride! We’ll look back and say, “Wow!” probably more than in any other industry. That’s a big part of the excitement for me. (5)

Promotions:

I have moved all over the world multiple times with multiple companies (with buy-outs), but I’ve been 27 years with the same company. (1)
I haven’t had a set career plan. It’s very unpredictable. I didn’t try to plot a course. Most of my opportunities have come from proving myself to someone - just doing a good job [often on special projects she volunteered for]. Then, when an opportunity came along, it was offered to me. (4)

When my kids were small I didn’t want to take major responsibilities. When my youngest was 13 and had his own life, that’s when I started to college. Before that, I wouldn’t look at anything because of them. Now, I thought, I can start focusing on my career. I had seen how many hours my husband worked and I wanted a job where I could come home at 5:00 p.m. (2)

I was being promoted every six to nine months, the industry was moving so fast. (3)

I had been interested in management right out of school. I recognized that there were people who were better engineers than I was, but I thought I would be successful as a manager. But, first, I had to have technical experience to be a manager. My entry into management was delayed for one year due to the birth of a child. [At her request, she was taking off three months after the birth of the child and didn’t want to do that right after moving into management]. . . I knew management was home. This is something I was better at than others. I like the broader responsibilities; engineering was too specialized. (4)

Then, I came up for a staff job, Project Manager, doing outsourcing, running another company’s computer. This was very technical. I went back to school for technical expertise, to the DU program in info systems and I loved it. I would be in Portland for four months setting up their system, then in LA for four months, then back to class. (2)

I took on a lot of special projects, budget issues which helped me meet people in upper management. I didn’t seek these; I had a reputation for getting things done. (4)

A big change was when I moved to the operating side [from the sales/marketing side]. The operating side was where the important people were and the money. I thought I would be a good manager; I’m good with people. It was tough to convince them to let me make the change, but I did and stayed in it for 16 years. I started learning tech then. I had to learn. It was frightening at first. (3)

I became a program manager. This was the best job I ever had, a high amount of growth. I owned a product; my team produced and marketed it. Then, they moved the product to Tucson. I didn’t want to move for family reasons). Many times today a job just goes away. (4)
That’s been the linkage for me in my career – special projects – visibility, contacts. (4)

I got a new boss at [her old company]. I really wanted to move up. I kept pushing him for feedback. I went to the Center for Creative Leadership, did a 360, and got a perfect read out. They said I would make a great CEO. I got back and couldn’t get in to see my boss; he still kept putting me off. Then [after a few weeks] he paged me, called me in, and told me he had hired a man from the outside who would be my new boss [inserting someone between him and her in a new position]. I’m very adaptable. I continued to do the best job I could do, but I lost all illusions that I would move up in that company. This boss started the first meeting with telling staff, if it comes to me or you, it will be you. He wasn’t a team builder, and, he really needed us, but he turned us off. [She went on to another company.] (5)

Moving is another big issue, or when I was moving up. You had to move with the company to move up. I was able to do this. I have seen women with great capability who were unable to move. These are personal decisions, but there are trade-offs. Today we are in the midst of change on moving. With low unemployment, people are able to switch from company to company. There is no company loyalty. This is healthier. It’s not so paternalistic. (1)

Future/Reflections:

But the problem is I don’t promote myself much or so my husband tells me. I have let it [my career path] take its course. People come to me with jobs. The other problem is that I have worked in areas that were not core to the company. (4)

I made one mistake. I went too vertical. I should have done some lateral moves to learn more. That prepared you better. I missed the boat there. (5)

Today, it’s very different [from when she first started]. I raised my daughter to go to college. She has been more conscious, though, of the choices she can make. She’s a lawyer now and says she’ll stay at home when she has children. She sees this as an option. Maybe we were pushed by the women’s movement to do it all. (5)

Traits/qualities and family influence
[To what do you attribute your success?] Perseverance, hanging in there, willingness to take risks and try new things, to move to new locations. Genetically, I’ve always been very responsible. My father became very ill when I was 9, a severe heart attack. This made me think I should always be able to take care of myself. (1)

My grandmother, who probably only had a 6th grade education, always said to me, “You want to grow up and be somebody.” She was self-taught and she was an inspiration. My mother was a single parent. She took us to the library every Saturday. I read two to three books a week. I loved learning. (2)

I was the first person in my family to go to college. My father had Parkinson’s disease and was accidentally paralyzed in surgery for the disease. I got a job in the library to help support the family. This put me in touch with people with education. My mother was also a good model. She did everything with my father being sick for several years. (5)

When I started back to school, I ran into a girl in the bathroom crying about how hard the math was, that she wouldn’t be able to do it. I said, “Never say you can’t do it. You have to work at it, break it down, don’t say you can’t do it!” (2)

But, I’m a perfectionist and very thorough. When I went to college [as older student while working, had not attended college after high school] I went with the intention of graduating with honors and I did – cum laude. (2)

I had a natural inclination to management. I liked having responsibility. I’m a little bossy. (4)

I had a reputation for getting things done. (4)

I kind of liked [working in] hardware because of my being an anomaly as a woman. I felt I could take pride in having made it in this all-male area. (4)

I had to win [first boss] over when I first started. I read everything that crossed his desk. I loved [the company]. My mother thought I was crazy. I loved the ambiance, the idea of building something new – high tech. My boss had a great vision of computers. I was enthralled with his vision. (5)

I was born to be a workhorse. I like to work. (5)