Chapter 6

EVIDENCE FROM INTERVIEWS

...three are the times, the past, the present, and the future; however, it could be said: three are the times, the present of the past, the present of the present and the present of the future. Although they are already in our mind, we can see them from another perspective: the present of the past is the memory, the present of the present is the direct representation of an aspect of reality, the present of the future is the expectation [St Augustine].

One way of collecting evidence is to talk to people. This is an act of listening. While there is a place for reading out questions from a multiple choice questionnaires, doing so barely qualifies as listening or even as meaningful conversation. This chapter is concerned with who to listen to, how to listen, and whether what you hear is likely to be informative. Some of the labels given to the practice of listening are "nondirective interviews," "qualitative research," and "long interviews." Whatever the process is called (and as the quote above suggests), learning from listening is not easy.

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning...
[Proverbs 1:5].

The essential difference between the long interview and reading out a questionnaire is that considered, reflective judgments are sought. For example, the respondent may need to discuss the issue before attempting to reach a conclusion. Questionnaires, the instruments of the scientific method, are only useful when asking for numbers, such as age, number of employees, or last year's reported profit. The early empirical evidence on the usefulness of collecting verbal evidence came from the psychology literature: on balance it was rather critical. However, the need to understand employees attitudes and the failure of check-type questionnaires to produce any useful data meant that the sociologists were used to develop acceptable procedures for conducting long interviews. These will be discussed later. On the other hand, the empirical evidence on who to interview, comes largely from the forecasting literature.
Who to Interview

Before discussing how to conduct a long interview it is necessary to consider who should be interviewed. This question can be decided in numerous ways. Examples include 1) those with intention rather than opinion, 2) experts, semi-experts and non-experts, and 3) the optimists and the pessimists.

Intentions vs Opinions

The relative accuracy of listening to those with intention rather than with just an opinion is not clear. It has been argued [Armstrong, 1985] that more accurate responses can be expected from asking those with intentions to act rather than those who only have opinions on the actions of others. For example, the directors of a company were expected to be more accurate than outside business analysts in providing evidence on their own company. The directors are explaining their feelings on something that they have the power to make into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The directors' intentions were therefore expected to be more accurate than the outsiders' opinion. The alternative argument is that the outsiders have an impartial view of the situation. As part of the issue of opinion versus intent, there is concern that managers might lie. Put another way, managers might be deceiving themselves, perhaps by either excessive optimism or to not taking sufficient account of the general commercial climate, such as changing interest rates. Furthermore, numerous psychology experiments suggest that there is an optimism bias in all humans decisions. Most people feel that desirable things will happen to them and undesirable things will happen to others, and anyway undesirable things occur less often! Therefore, the inside information of the managers, plus their ability to play with the numbers to achieve their own comments, was not unquestionably seen as giving managers' intentions more credence.

Pollack-Johnson et al. [1990] particularly question the use of intentions for evidence that concerns things that might happen a long time in the future. They argue that respondents are often slow to appreciate fully the impact of structural changes, whether economic or social. Respondents do not appreciate likely revisions to their present intentions, which makes such evidence unreliable.

The use of intentions versus opinion would therefore appear to have its limitations for classifying the reliability of evidence. The classification also