

MASTER INTERVIEW DISCUSSION GUIDE: CERTIFICATION PROCESS SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS - ALL PROGRAMS

INTRODUCTION

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is _____ and I am a researcher with 2M Research (2M), the policy research firm contracted by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) for this study.

I will start by briefly introducing the study, obtaining consent, and making sure we cover any questions you have before beginning the interview.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the customer experience for small businesses that apply for certification and [recertification/Annual Review] for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone]¹ and other programs. We are speaking with selected small businesses to understand the positive and negative aspects of the customer experience with the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program. The SBA will use this information to inform its technology design, customer service, and certification and recertification process improvements.

INFORMED CONSENT

During this interview, we will be asking you questions about your experience with the certification process for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program, its web platform, and overall customer experience with the SBA. Our discussion should last approximately 60 minutes. There are no right or wrong answers. You can refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

The information collected by the 2M Study Team will be anonymized for reporting to the SBA. All analyses will be conducted using a de-identified data file and will be aggregated and summarized for public reporting. Your identity will not be shared, and specific comments you make will not be linked to you specifically.

Before we begin, we would like to have your permission to record our discussion so that we can ensure our notes are accurate and complete. The recordings will be deleted once the project is complete.

Can we record this conversation?

Yes

No

▪ **If interviewee(s) agrees to be recorded:**

- Thanks. Now, we are going to turn on the recorder (**TURN ON RECORDER**). Can you please confirm that you have agreed to be recorded?

▪ **If interviewee(s) declines:**

¹ Note to interviewer: tailor language to specific programs as follows - Leave out for WOSB; for 8(a), call this Annual Review; for HUBZone, call it recertification (done annually) or program examination (every 3 years) - as applicable.

- o Okay, that is not a problem. We will take detailed notes on this conversation in order to ensure that your views are recorded accurately. You may hear me typing during our conversation.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may stop at any time. There will be no negative consequences if you choose to stop or if you choose not to participate at all. We will only use your responses to this interview for research purposes. Would you still like to participate in the study?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

If you have questions about this study after this interview, please email Dr. Paul Ruggiere, the study's principal investigator, at pruggiere@2mresearch.com, or the SBA's contact for this study, Lisa Hechtman, at Lisa.Hechtman@sba.gov. I can repeat those email addresses later if you decide later to write them down.

Interviewee List <Internal for the study team>

Interviewee	Role	Organization

Participant Type	Interviewer Instructions
Applicant (still pending)	Ask questions as written; skip questions when indicated
Certified	First year participant: ask questions as written
Undergoing Annual Review/Undergoing Recertification/Program Examination ²	Substitute the relevant listed descriptor in left cell for "certification" in the text

Respondent Background

We would like to start by learning more about you and your role in the {insert program name} certification process of your business.

1) Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your role at {insert business name}

Probe:

- How long have you been working in this role?
- What was your role in the {insert program name} certification process of your business?

Obtaining General Information

Now, we would like to learn about your experience obtaining information about the SBA {insert program name} certification process.

2) When you began to prepare for the application process for the {insert program name} program, where did you first look for information?

- How easy was it to find the information you were seeking? (probe for use of the SBA website(s), seminar(s), partner organizations, document checklists, Top Tips, open calls)

² Tailor language to program as described in footnote 1.

- To what extent was the information clear?
 - Did you have any questions? If so, for what topic(s) did you request help?

3) Did you request any information from SBA staff? If so, how responsive were they to your request?

Probe (as needed):

- From whom did you request help/support (for example, someone in the field, the customer service desk, other employees, etc.)?
- How long did it take to receive the information you requested?
- Was the information provided by SBA staff clear?
 - Did you need to do any follow up? If so, please elaborate.
- Did you receive all the information you requested? If not, what information was missing?
 - How did you fill the information gap?
 - Did you find the missing information through other sources? If so, what sources?
- How can the SBA improve the responsiveness of its staff to business owners' requests for information?

4) What additional information would be helpful for new business owners applying for {insert program name} certification?

Probe (as needed):

- What resources would be helpful to new business owners seeking information about the {insert program name} certification process?

Submission of Application

Next, we would like to learn about your experience preparing and submitting your application for {insert program name} certification.

5) Please describe your experience preparing required application documents.

NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: GO THROUGH THE APPLICANT CHECKLIST TO JOG RESPONDENT'S MEMORY.

Probe (as needed):

What elements of the experience were positive, and why?

What elements of the experience were negative, and why?

Follow-up (if not mentioned previously): Did you use the {knowledge base tools on certify.sba.gov // information on the SBA.gov/HUBZone website} to help you prepare your application?

If yes, what did you find most helpful about those tools, and why? Was there anything you did not find helpful about those tools, and why?

If no, are you aware if the {knowledge base tools on certify.sba.gov / information on the SBA.gov/HUBZone website}?

If yes, why did you choose not to use the [knowledge base tools on certify.sba.gov / information on the SBA.gov/HUBZone website](https://knowledgebase.tools.certify.sba.gov/)?

- 6) Did you experience any challenges providing any of the required documentation for the application?
- If so, what documentation, and what challenges did you experience?
 - How did you overcome these challenges?
- 7) Please describe your experience completing the application.
Probe (as needed):
- What elements of the experience were positive, and why?
 - What elements of the experience were negative, and why?
 - What did you like about the application process?
 - What didn't you like about the application process?
 - Were there any parts of the application process that you did not understand? If so, which were they? How did you resolve this issue?
- 8) To what extent do you feel there were duplications or redundancies in the application process? Please elaborate on what you found to be redundant about the process.
- 9) Some business owners report having difficulty with the SBA web platform during application submission. What was your experience with this platform?
- What were the key challenges you experienced in using the platform?
 - What did you like about the platform?
- 10) Did you seek assistance from the SBA at any point during the application process? If yes, please elaborate on the extent to which the customer service was timely and effective in resolving your concerns.
Probe (as needed):
- What assistance were you seeking from the SBA?
 - How long did it take to receive assistance?
 - Were you satisfied with the assistance you received?
 - If so, what did the SBA do well in assisting you?
 - If not, what can the SBA do better to improve its customer service?
 - Did you contact the SBA via email and/or phone?
 - How easy was it for you to reach the SBA?
 - Some business owners have expressed a desire for a live chat option. To what extent do you think that this would have made a difference in your experience, and why?
- 11) Other than the SBA, did anyone outside your organization (a third party) assist you with the application process? If so, who assisted you and what type of assistance did they provide?

If yes, did you pay for these services? Are you comfortable sharing what you were charged for these services?

Application Review

Next, we'd like to learn about your experience interacting with the SBA during the application review phase.

12) What communication did you have with the SBA during the application review phase (i.e., the period after you had submitted your application and the SBA was reviewing it)?

Probe (as needed):

- To what extent did the SBA make next steps and application status available?
- How satisfied are you with the level of communication you received from the SBA?
 - What, if anything, did the SBA do particularly well?
 - What, if anything, can the SBA do better to improve communication during the application review phase?

13) Was your application returned to you at any point for additional information? If so, why was it returned?

- To what extent was it clear to you why the application was returned, and what you needed to do in order to resubmit?

14) What were some of the key challenges you experienced during the application process?

- To what extent was the SBA able to mitigate those challenges?

Decision

NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: SKIP Q16 FOR THE "APPLICANT" GROUP

Now, we would like to ask you about your experience interacting with the SBA during the decision phase.

15) Please describe the process in which you were informed of your certification decision.

- To what extent do you feel that the decision about certification was communicated clearly?
- To what extent do you feel that the decision about certification was communicated in a timely manner?
 - How long did it take to receive a certification decision?

Final Questions

Finally, we would like to ask you about your overall customer experience and any additional feedback you would like to share with the SBA.

16) Overall, what was the most challenging aspect of the {insert program name} application process and why?

- What can the SBA do to mitigate this challenge?

17) What additional feedback would you share with the SBA to help improve the {insert program name} certification process?

Closing

Those are all of the questions we have for you today. Now I would like to give an opportunity to share anything else that you think would be helpful for us to know about the {insert program name} certification process. Is there anything I didn't ask that I should have asked?

I want to thank you again for taking the time to speak with me. Should you have any additional thoughts that you would like to share, please feel free to contact us.

INVITATION/STUDY RECRUITMENT INTRODUCTION EMAIL:
Government Contracting Certification Customer Experience Evaluation (GCC-CX)

Dear NAME,

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) is conducting a study to learn more about the customer experience for small businesses that apply for certification or recertification for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program. The SBA will use this information to inform technology, customer service, and application process improvements. Based on your application for [certification /Annual Review/recertification/examination] for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program, your firm has been identified as a potential participant in this study.

The SBA's contractor, 2M Research, will be reaching out to you this week to request your participation in a 45-to 60-minute interview for a day and time convenient to you. The interview does not require any preparation beforehand. Your participation is voluntary. Whether you choose to participate or not to participate, neither decision will impact your relationship with the SBA and the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program. If you choose to participate, your responses will be aggregated with other responses and will not be identified with you specifically in 2M's report to the SBA.

We greatly appreciate you setting aside some time from your busy schedule to participate in this interview. If you have questions about this study, please email Dr. Paul Ruggiere, the study's Project Director, at pruggiere@2mresearch.com, or the SBA's contact for this study, Lisa Hechtman, at Lisa.Hechtman@sba.gov.

The SBA and 2M thank you in advance for your participation in this important study. We look forward to learning your insights about and experiences with the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] [certification/ Annual Review/recertification/examination] process.

Cordially,

SBA SIGNATURE

INVITATION/STUDY RECRUITMENT EMAIL:
Government Contracting Certification Customer Experience Evaluation (GCC-CX)

Dear [NAME],

I am following up on the email that the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) sent yesterday to request your participation in a study that 2M Research (2M) is conducting on their behalf.

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the customer experience for small businesses that apply for [certification/ Annual Review/recertification/examination] for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program. We will be conducting telephone interviews with selected small businesses to understand the positive and negative aspects of customer experience and reasons for those experiences with the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program. The SBA will use this information to inform technology, customer service, and application process improvements.

The information you provide in the 45-to 60-minute interview will be aggregated with other responses and will not be identified with you. The interview does not require any preparation beforehand. Your participation is voluntary. Whether you choose to participate or not to participate, neither decision will impact your relationship with the SBA and the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program.

We are currently scheduling interviews with selected small businesses for the months of {insert month} and {insert month}. To assist with the scheduling process, we've attached the "SBA GCC-CX Interview Scheduler" spreadsheet. **Please indicate your first, second, and third choices for interview dates and times within the spreadsheet and email it back to me by {insert date}.**

If you have any questions or would like additional information about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or reach out to the **SBA's contact for this study, Lisa Hechtman, at Lisa.Hechtman@sba.gov.**

The SBA and 2M thank you in advance for your participation in this important study.

Sincerely,

Paul Ruggiere
Project Director

INVITATION/STUDY SCHEDULING EMAIL:
Government Contracting Certification Customer Experience Evaluation (GCC-CX)

Dear [NAME],

Last week we requested your participation in a study that 2M Research (2M) is conducting behalf of the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA). We have not heard back from you, so we are making this second request for your participation.

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the customer experience for small businesses that apply for [certification/ Annual Review/recertification/examination] for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program. We will be conducting telephone interviews with selected small businesses to understand the positive and negative aspects of customer experience and reasons for those experiences with the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program. The SBA will use this information to inform technology, customer service, and [certification/recertification/Annual Review] process improvements.

The information you provide in the 45-to 60-minute interview will be aggregated with other responses and will not be identified with you. The interview does not require any preparation beforehand. Your participation is voluntary. Whether you choose to participate or not to participate, neither decision will impact your relationship with the SBA and the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program.

We are currently scheduling interviews with selected small businesses for the months of {insert month} and {insert month}. To assist with the scheduling process, we've attached the "SBA GCC-CX Interview Scheduler" spreadsheet. **Please indicate your first, second, and third choices for interview dates and times within the spreadsheet and email it back to me by {insert date}.**

If you have any questions or would like additional information about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or reach out to **SBA's contact for this study, Lisa Hechtman, at Lisa.Hechtman@sba.gov.**

The SBA and 2M thank you in advance for your participation in this important study.

Sincerely,

Paul Ruggiere
Project Director

TELEPHONE RECRUITMENT SCRIPT:

Government Contracting Certification Customer Experience Evaluation (GCC-CX)

Q1. Hello, my name is [STUDY TEAM MEMBER NAME]. I am calling from 2M Research on behalf of the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) to follow up on an email that was recently sent to [RESPONDENT'S NAME]. Would that be you?

- 1 SPEAKING TO RESPONDENT.....[GO TO Q3]
- 2 NOT SPEAKING TO RESPONDENT.....[GO TO Q2]
- 3 NOT A GOOD TIME[SCHEDULE CALLBACK]
- 4 NO SUCH PERSON.....[S/O WRONG NUMBER]
- 5 NO LONGER AT THIS PHONE NUMBER[UPDATE PHONE NUMBER]
- 6 REFUSED (HANG UP)[MARK OUTCOME]

Q2. Is there a direct line to reach him/her? Is he/she available?

- 1 OFFERS DIRECT PHONE NUMBER.....[UPDATE PHONE NUMBER]
- 2 YES, AVAILABLE.....[GO TO Q4]
- 3 NOT AVAILABLE.....[GO TO LM1]
- 4 DON'T KNOW[SCHEDULE CALLBACK]
- 5 REFUSED[MARK OUTCOME]

Q3. The email was an invitation to participate in an SBA study to learn more about the customer experience for small businesses that apply for certification and recertification for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program. [GO TO Q5]

Q4. Hello, my name is [STUDY TEAM MEMBER NAME], and I am calling from 2M Research. We recently sent you an email invitation to participate in an SBA study to learn more about the customer experience for small businesses that apply for [certification/Annual Review/recertification/examination] for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program. [GO TO Q5]

Q5. The SBA will use information from this study to inform technology, customer service, and certification and recertification process improvements.

We noticed that you have not responded to our invitation to participate, so we just wanted to be sure that you received the email invitation. The email address we have for you is [EMAIL ADDRESS]. Is that correct?

- 1 YES.....[GO TO Q7]
- 2 NO.....[UPDATE EMAIL ADDRESS; GO TO Q6]

Q6. We will send you another invitation to participate shortly. Do you have any questions about the study?

- 1 YES[ANSWER QUESTIONS]
- 2 NO[GO TO Q9]

Q7. Would you like for me to send you another invitation to participate in the study?

- 1 YES[GO TO Q8]
- 2 NO[GO TO Q8]

Q8. Do you have any questions about the study?

- 1 YES[ANSWER QUESTIONS]
- 2 NO[GO TO Q9]

Q9. The intent of the study is to ensure businesses like yours is represented so your participation is very important to the success of this study. The deadline to participate is [DATE]. If you have any questions at all, please free to contact us at PHONE NUMBER or at EMAIL. Thank you for your time.

EMERGENCY/SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

I am sorry to catch you at a bad time. I'll try again later. Thank you. [END PHONE CALL. INTERVIEWER: FILL OUT ADVERSE EVENT FORM.]

TELEPHONE SCRIPT FOR LEAVING MESSAGES

LM1. [IF WITH A PERSON]

My name is [STUDY TEAM MEMBER NAME], and I am calling from 2M Research about the **Government Contracting Certification Customer Experience Evaluation** that we are conducting on behalf of the U.S. Small Business Administration. The purpose of the study is to learn more about the customer experience for small businesses that apply for certification or recertification for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program.

We have not yet received a response from [RESPONDENT'S NAME]. If [RESPONDENT'S NAME] received our email, please encourage [him/her] to schedule an appointment. If [he/she] did not receive the email, please have [him/her] contact us at [PHONE NUMBER] or at [EMAIL]. Thank you.

LM2. [IF ON AN ANSWERING DEVICE]

My name is [STUDY TEAM MEMBER NAME], and I am calling from 2M Research about the **Government Contracting Certification Customer Experience Evaluation** that we are conducting on behalf of the U.S. Small Business Administration. The purpose of the study is to learn more about the customer experience for small businesses that apply for certification or recertification for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] programs.

We noticed that you have not responded to our invitation to participate so we just wanted to be sure that you received the email invitation. A response to the invitation is due by [DATE]. Please contact us at [PHONE NUMBER] or at [EMAIL]. Thank you.

INTERVIEW REMINDER EMAIL:

Government Contracting Certification Customer Experience Evaluation (GCC-CX)

Hello, [Name]

I hope you are having a good week so far. I am writing to remind you that we are scheduled for an interview with _____ tomorrow, **DATE AND TIME**, for the customer experience study for small businesses that apply for certification or recertification for the [8(a)/WOSB/HUBZone] program. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

I look forward to speaking with you!

Regards,
