Nominal Group

Nominal Group technique (NGT) is a structured variation of a small-group discussion to develop a set of priorities for action.

NGT goes a step further than brainstorming. It gathers reflections from individuals on a specific topic which generates discussion to build shared understanding. A moderator guides the group through a structured approach to prioritisation of their ideas or suggestions.

It is designed to promote the identification of key problems or in the development of solutions that can be tested further using more strategic deliberative processes.

The process:
- prevents the domination of the discussion by an individual
- encourages all group members to participate
- results in prioritised actions or recommendations that represent the groups' preferences, providing context for final deliberation.

What is to be achieved?

NGT helps to uncover and explore diverse views on an issue in a short space of time.

Rather than launching people into a discussion they had not time to consider, this technique allows for a quiet individual reflection time and writing of ideas before the discussion begins.

This approach leads to the generation of more ideas for consideration and higher quality decision making. It also increases the group's sense of accomplishment and greater satisfaction towards the quality of the outputs.

What is the format?

NGT uses a structured format lasting between 60 – 90 minutes, to obtain multiple inputs from several people on a problem or issue. Groups consist of 5 to 9 participants and for larger numbers, sub-groups can be organised.

The round robin methodology for capturing ideas is generally used as part of this technique. It fosters equal participation and allows participants to democratically identify their priorities for decision making.

See this very short video from Post-It Australia and New Zealand with an example of how NGT is used.

Nominal Group

Online use of the tool?

An online NGT can be used for knowledge transfer which could provide support to other deliberative processes: Using Online Nominal Group Technique to Implement Knowledge Transfer.

Research has indicated that traditional NGTs provide better outcomes than the online version. Structuring group decision making in a web-based environment by using the nominal group technique.

What to consider?

Bringing all voices into the discussion

This is critical when holding a NGT.

People process differently

Some people can think very quickly however they may not always think deeply, and the result can be limited in application. Some people need time to process the information they are receiving to provide deeper insights as a result.

NGT process allows time for thinking in silence to support the contributions people make to discussions. Some people can easily voice their concerns, while others prefer to capture their views in writing. NGT facilitates these abilities which increases the capacity of inclusive group participation.

The spark

Some issues are so well entrenched that individuals "can't see the forest for the trees". A spark of an idea or an insight from one group participant can stimulate innovative thinking among other participants.

Think new people, new ideas

There is wisdom in the crowds (Surowiecki, 2000) and you get to hear new ideas when you meet new people in a deliberative process.

Structured approach

When there is conflict in an issue, a structured approach like NGT allows participants to focus on a process that leads to clear democratically.

Nominal Group

How to use the Nominal Group technique?

Before the session

• Prepare information on the topic for distribution to participants prior to the session, e.g. discussion papers, reports, draft plans, research papers, project scope or a copy of a previous group discussions.

• Prepare a welcome statement that explains the purpose of the meeting, outlines individual roles and group norms; and describes how the output from the session will be used.

During the session

• Present a summary of information on the topic for discussion to prepare people for participation

• Provide participants with paper (e.g. large sticky notes) and a marker pen.

• Outline the process to participants so they know what to expect and don't jump ahead of the process:

STAGE

1	Silent generation of ideas in writing
2	Round-robin recording of ideas
3	Discussion on ideas
4	Ranking of ideas
5	Tallying of ranking
6	Review of ranking

Nominal Group

STAGE 1

Silent generation of ideas in writing

- Ask everyone to spend 5 minutes in quiet reflection on the topic and when ready, to write ideas in brief phrases on the sticky notes (one idea per note) using marker pens so the writing is easy for everyone to see.
- Encourage everyone to work silently and independently.

STAGE 2

Round-Robin recording of ideas

- Take one idea from everyone to start off with a round robin and display them on a wall.
- Let everyone know ideas can be added after a complete round of the group.
- Ideas will be discussed once they are up on the sticky wall – the task in stage 2 is to get the ideas posted.
- If an idea is already on the list, ask people to share another one to avoid duplication.

STAGE 3

Discussion on ideas

- Allow 40 minutes for people to talk, listen and understand what they are hearing.
- Check in with the group when you think it is time to move on to another idea.
- Look for opportunities to theme ideas or draw out areas of differentiation within a common theme such as communication versus public relations.
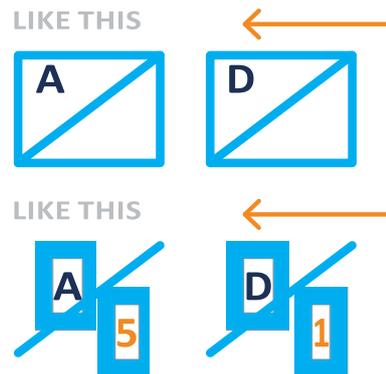
STAGE 4

Ranking of ideas

- When the group is clear about the ideas, you can assign each idea on the sticky wall with a letter of the alphabet (a, b, c, etc.).
- Hand out index cards to the participants - sticky notes are good for this Ask people to select what they think are the 5 most important ideas out of all the ideas on the wall and write the letter of the 5 ideas they choose in the upper left hand corner of each card (see example).
- Demonstrate with a card so everyone is clear about what to do.
- Look at their 5 cards and ask people to select the one they think is the most important out of the five ideas they have selected. Write a 5 in the lower right-hand corner.
- Pick the card they think is the least important and write a 1 in the lower right-hand corner.
- Select the most important card among the three remaining cards and place a 4 in the lower right-hand corner.

- Select the most important card among the two remaining cards and write 3 in the lower right-hand corner and then for the least important write 2 on the last card.

(note: it is more difficult for people to rank 5 ideas in one hit – going progressively for most important and then least important makes it easier to decide)

LIKE THIS

A   D

LIKE THIS

A   D
5   1

STAGE 5

Tally of ranking

- Assign someone the role of transferring the scores to a tally sheet.
- While this is happening, the moderator can check in with participants for feedback on the process.

STAGE 6

Review of ranking

- Post the results of the ranking on the wall using colourful 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th cards.
- Participants may want to know further ranking numbers to see how close the ranking might have been.
- Conduct a general review of the results. This does not include reversing the ranking order but it may involve discussion on for example, "what ideas were ranked 6th and 7th because the voting was very close".
- Close out the NGT by letting people know what will happen next with the results of the process.

After the session

- Write up the notes in the themes identified by the participants.
- Write up the rankings.
- Summarise the information for use in action planning or for use in further decision making.

Don't post similar ideas

No need to post ideas on notes that are already on the wall to help manage the display of ideas. Help the group to recognise ideas that are similar in context but may be worded slightly differently.

How to Evaluate?

- NGT may itself be used as an evaluation tool with some modifications.
- Participants could be asked to rank their level of satisfaction with the process, what their thoughts were on the outcomes of the process or if the results were close to what they expected.
- The value of the outcomes to support decision making could be assessed on a likert scale, i.e. (5-1) .

Resources Required?

- Facilitator trained in the use of the technique.
- A meeting room large enough to seat a group of participants at tables set out in a U-shape configuration with plenty of space in between tables if there is many participants.
- Flip charts, tape, markers pens and sticky notes for each participant and either 3" x 5" index cards or small post-it notes.
- Tally board or sheets to record ranking of ideas.

Tips and helpful hints

Post it notes and marker pens

Have plenty of large and small post it notes and marker pens for participants to use.

Don't censor ideas

Facilitate discussion on ideas to gain clarification, not to dismiss ideas or resolve differences of opinions.

Sort ideas into themes

Engage participants in sorting the ideas into themes on the wall.

Keep all ideas that make the wall

Keep all ideas (notes) visible on the wall – do not discount ideas that stand alone.

Nominal Group

Further resources

American Society for Quality

Nominal Group Technique short explanatory video by Gregg Learning

Participedia Nominal Group Technique

See this paper from the British Ecological Society on using NGT for ecology and conservation