Social Survey Data Collection

1. Learning Objectives

After reviewing this chapter readers should be able to:

- Identify the underlying principles of organizing social survey data collection;
- Define the key competencies required for successful recruitment of social survey interviewers;
- Recognize the central components of an effective interviewer training program;
- Develop strategies for monitoring interviewer performance and addressing performance issues.

Office of Behavioral and
Social Sciences Research

Department of Health
and Human Services

National Institutes
of Health

2. Introduction

The challenge faced by all data collection agencies is to produce high quality and timely data that are collected in a cost effective manner.

In many respects this is becoming more difficult, not least because the long-term trend is of declining survey cooperation rates (Martin and Matheson, 1999; De Leeuw and De Heer, 2004). All survey organizations work hard to counter this trend, whether through more sophisticated means of understanding response patterns and management of interviewer activity, better training of interviewers, or simply by paying respondents more to participate in their surveys. In addition, there are some basic principles governing the organization of fieldwork that, if followed, will lead to improvements in the efficiency and quality of the data collected. This chapter aims to outline these principles, based largely on observations made while working in the two biggest data collection agencies in the UK, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen).

Most of the observations relate to face-to-face data collection, principally with households or private individuals. However, many of the recommendations can be applied in other settings, for example, data collection by telephone. It has also been assumed that Computer-Assisted Interviewing (CAI) is the standard format for data collection.

In the broadest sense interviewers are there to:

…seek the cooperation of members of the public unknown to themselves to participate in voluntary surveys that can be about one or a number of subject areas on which they will not have any personal expertise.

2. Introduction

In practice, however, there are numerous responsibilities and expectations associated with interviewing, which are worth detailing. For instance, interviewers will have to:

- Encounter and deal with members of the public, a percentage of whom will show varying degrees of unwillingness to participate;
- Follow precisely complex instructions;
- Ask a series of questions to a high technical standard which collectively constitute the interview; and
- Explain complex concepts within the confines of the guidelines set out by the survey researchers.

Often research projects will involve more than just a face-to-face interview.

Administering a diary, collecting blood or saliva samples, and measuring a respondent's cognitive ability are just some of the more complex tasks we ask interviewers to undertake. In many ways, the development of CAI has broadened what researchers can do and with it have come greater demands on survey interviewers --- no longer is their job a matter of finding the correct address and asking a set of questions.

It is important to appreciate that the intervention is a manipulable alteration in the status quo and, in that important sense, observational studies are akin to experiments.

The reputation of the research organization can be put at risk depending on their behavior. Interviewers must:

- Work in a professional manner, being polite and courteous but at the same time encouraging response in what can sometimes be the face of extreme reluctance; and,
- Maintain confidentiality and the general safekeeping of all information they collect.

The job of a social survey interviewer is therefore a challenging one, and the managers of interviewers need to create an environment that will promote the achievement of all of the above.

3. Recruitment

Field interviewers work in an environment where supervision is minimal; however, management expects to exert considerable control over almost every aspect of their job. Until relatively recently, the interviewer-manager relationship was based mostly on trust, as the opportunity to observe was limited and often costly. As a result, considerable emphasis was placed on recruiting personnel that were suited to the job and then providing them with sufficient training.

> **It is important to appreciate that the intervention is a manipulable alteration in the status quo and, in that important sense, observational studies are akin to experiments.**

This is especially important because interviewer turnover tends to be high – in the UK turnover is typically 20-30 percent annually - and therefore, taken with the costs associated with training personnel, the benefits of a successful recruitment process are clear.

3. Recruitment

Qualities Needed for Interviewing

When recruiting interviewers the following characteristics are considered essential:

- **Ability to communicate.** This is usually the competency that is given the greatest weight, as it covers so many different dimensions of the job. This is also particularly apparent on the doorstep, where the interviewer will usually only have a small amount of time to convince the respondent to participate. They need to be able to communicate with people from all backgrounds as the work will regularly take them outside of their own social strata. It also applies to the physical delivery of the survey: does the applicant speak clearly?
- **Nimble thinker.** Interviewers need to quickly translate visual and verbal clues to assist in constructing responses to aid survey participation.
- **Availability and flexibility.** The job will often involve working unsocial hours. At its simplest, the interviewer needs to be out when others are at home.
- **Well organized.** It is essential that interviewers are well organized and disciplined if they are to handle their work effectively and economically. They need to be able not only to plan and carry out their daily work but also to follow strict survey procedures.

Formal educational qualifications are relevant only insofar as they indicate the presence of the qualities listed above.

> Be honest with new recruits about the expectations and demands of the job.

It is important that potential recruits are made aware of all of the above requirements and demands of the job. Interviewers that have quit in the first 12 months of employment have regularly reported as their reason for leaving that the job was different from what they had expected. It pays for survey organizations to review their recruitment literature to ensure that it states clearly what we are asking new recruits to do.

⚙ Exercise 1: Interviewer Recruitment

Following is a job description for a social survey interviewer which sets out the key competencies required, and conditions of employment.

Review the description and select which of the questions following it would be appropriate to ask.

> **JOB DESCRIPTION**
> **Social Survey Interviewer:** This position involves interactions with people, in their homes, to find out more about their health status, employment, education and access to the health care system among other important issues.
>
> **Job requirements include:** Friendly approach, ability to communicate and interact well with people. Ability to persuade reluctant individuals to agree to be interviewed while respecting their rights as a research subject. Ability to organize and manage time effectively. Travel is a requirement of the position and ability to conduct interviews in a variety of locations. Sensitivity to multi-cultural populations is a must. Strong interpersonal skills are required with ability to interview difficult respondents. Evening and weekend work may be required.
>
> **Specific duties will include:** Planning and preparing for survey; visiting addresses in person; making contact with the household member; gaining co-operation to participate; following study protocol; administering questionnaires; collecting and recording data and checking data; returning data to study site.

QUESTIONS:

Can you give me any examples of where you have had to communicate with Latinos?	I see Spanish listed on your resume as a skill, where did you learn to speak it?
The hours for this position are evening and weekend. Do you have any obligations that will conflict with those hours?	Are you able to work evenings and weekends?
This position would require you to enter respondent's homes, to that end we want to make sure we have hired a trustworthy individual. Have you ever had charges brought up against you for assault, drug position, drug distribution, etc.?	This position would require you to enter respondent's homes, to that end we want to make sure we have hired a trustworthy individual. Are there any concerns that would prevent you from comfortably performing these interviews?
In the position you would be spending 90% of your time traveling within the Boston Area. We are looking for a person who is familiar with the area – do you have any concerns with interviewing respondents in Boston and surrounding areas?	In the position you would be spending 90% of your time traveling within the Boston Area. We are looking for a person who is familiar with the area, how long have you lived in the area?

3. Recruitment

Recruitment Process

Survey organizations are no different from any other employer in seeking a method that identifies the best recruit in a cost effective manner. Though the means of recruiting social survey interviewers vary in terms of complexity and sophistication, the selection procedure commonly encompasses more than the traditional written application and interview. Core skills are now as likely to be identified through a number of the following:

- Role-play exercises, whereby the recruit might be asked to do a practice interview or a doorstep exercise. The former can be used to assess how applicants would come across to respondents, how well they adhere to the question wording and how accurately answers have been recorded, while the latter will demonstrate how they might convince a reluctant respondent;
- Laptop test, designed to illustrate whether they are comfortable using this technology which will be integral to their job;
- Map reading exercise, although somewhat outdated in the age of GPS, this test can also be used to show their organizational and time management skills.

> **At ONS in recent years we have used Assessment Centers. These employ a mixture of the above to score applicants in terms of the following competencies:**
>
> - **Personal effectiveness**
> - **Communication skills**
> - **Flexibility and availability**

The recruitment of survey interviewers remains a difficult and challenging task. As illustrated above, we tend to be very selective in terms of who we recruit, in the (well-founded) belief that it matters in terms of the quality of the outputs they will subsequently deliver. The drop-out and rejection rates from applications has always been high, with somewhere between 10 and 25% of all applicants eventually making it to the job of survey interviewer.

3. Recruitment

The Typical Interviewer

At the ONS the typical interviewer tends to be a male, in his mid- to late 50s, who has decided to pursue this employment after having retired from his main career. This is considerably different from ten or more years ago when the typical interviewer was a female returning to work, usually after having had children. Thus, whereas previously the field interviewer force was predominantly female, now around two-thirds (66%) are male.

Among the efforts to improve survey response rates is the suggestion that we match interviewer and respondent characteristics. For example, in areas with a high density of a given nationality or ethnic composition, having an interviewer with similar characteristics may improve survey co-operation. Similarly, matching gender may aid response in some circumstances as cultural norms dictate whether it is appropriate for same sex interactions. Social distance theories are used to support organizing fieldwork in this way; however, there is little empirical evidence to substantiate these assertions (Hox and De Leeuw, 2004). In practice, it is more usual for survey organizations to react to the requests of respondents rather than to predict preferences in advance of fieldwork.

Few interviewers do the job on a full-time basis, although it is becoming more commonplace. ONS interviewers work on average 100 hours per month with approximately a quarter (25%) working the equivalent of full-time hours.

3. Recruitment

The demand for social survey interviewing is often variable and unknown more than 12 months in advance. It pays to organize interviewer resources such that there is flexibility in the supply of interviewer hours worked.

From the data collection agencies' perspective, having a workforce that is largely part-time is advantageous as it makes it easier to cope with fluctuations in the demand for interviewer resources. As this demand is reliant on the agency's successfully bidding for work, it is not always predictable more than six to 12 months in advance.

From the interviewer's perspective, one of the main attractions of the job, besides the opportunity to meet other people, is the flexibility it offers in terms of when you work. The attractiveness of the flexibility can at times be at odds with the demands of the work, which may require door knocking at unsocial hours in an attempt to maximize contact rates. Balancing these seemingly conflicting needs represents one of the daily challenges of the interviewer manager.

3. Recruitment

> **There is no agreed best way of remunerating survey interviewers.**

There appears to be no consensus on the best method for remunerating staff. Typically, field interviewers in the UK have been paid according to the results they achieve – one amount for a full interview and a % of that amount in unproductive cases (e.g. refusals, non-contacts etc.). While this can be used to motivate interviewers to achieve better response, there are also drawbacks to this approach. A lack of certainty about how much they will be paid and the fact that this will vary on a month-on-month basis can de-motivate staff and make it more difficult to recruit new starters. Also, new interviewers, who tend to perform less well, will be paid less at a time when they are more vulnerable to leaving. These difficulties can be overcome by introducing guaranteed elements to the pay; however, this can mitigate the main benefit of this approach, which is to act as a motivator for better response.

Another perceived problem with a pay-by-results (PBR) approach is that it may create an incentive for interviewers to compromise on quality, as the real return for getting the "easy" interview is much higher than for "harder" cases. This can be overcome through appropriate monitoring of interviewer performance.

The main alternative to PBR is to pay interviewers for the hours they work, regardless of results. ONS has adopted this approach for some time, firstly by paying an hourly wage and secondly by employing interviewers on an annualized hours contract. As with the PBR approach it has its good and bad points. It is preferable for the certainty it affords interviewers, which has benefited turnover of staff, and from the data collection perspective it gives an equal weighting to all cases regardless of whether getting a response is more or less time consuming. The negative is that it is harder to plan with certainty a survey's cost.

4. Interviewer Training

Though there are many ways in which training of new interviewers can take place, there are always some important aspects that need to be covered. For example, there tend to be three stages in the training of a survey interviewer.

- Stage 1: Basic or formal introductory training
- Stage 2: On the job training
- Stage 3: Survey specific training

The first two mainly cover the generic skills of an interviewer, while the latter represents the information they need to carry out a specific study. These can be carried out sequentially, although it is likely that stages 2 and 3 will be done in a complementary manner.

Stage 1: Basic or Formal Introductory Training

At a minimum, formal generic training should cover the following:

- How to organize workloads;
- Establishing contact and gaining co-operation;
- Conducting the interview;
- Interviewing techniques and methods of recording responses.

In addition, initial training will also likely cover the administrative tasks required to fulfil the job. Some of these will be related to the survey process, such as how to return work to the office, but it will also cover tasks like how to make pay and expenses claims. For the new starter, the latter will be very important. Since most new starters will inevitably find the job difficult in the first few weeks and months, mainly because they will find it hard coping with rejection on the doorstep, it is in the survey organization's best interest to make sure that the processes for supporting their staff work correctly from the outset. Difficulties with getting paid or delays in processing expense claims have the potential to be tipping points in an interviewer's decision to voluntarily leave the job.

4. Interviewer Training

Do not assume that interviewers will know how to effectively plan their work.

How to Organize Workloads

It is important to allocate time to train new starters on how to effectively organize their workloads. The aim is to get interviewers to work effectively, and by this we usually mean to maximize the proportion of their time spent interviewing. To get interviewers to spend more time interviewing they need to properly plan.

When work is allocated to an interviewer it is done in a way that makes optimal use of resources. Sampled addresses will be given to interviewers with the requisite skills – for example, they have been briefed on a survey – and to those who live within a reasonable proximity of the area. There may be other requisites used when allocating work, such as past performance, level of experience, to name but a few. However once a sample has been allocated, an interviewer then needs to deal with the addresses in an efficient manner, as in most cases the order in which addresses are presented to them will not be the most efficient order in which they should be dealt. Some GIS systems can help with this; however, a degree of interviewer discretion will always be required, particularly after first visits have been made.

Not only do interviewers need to consider the order in which to visit addresses to work efficiently, they also need to consider when to make the first call. Logically, the aim is to contact the appropriate person for interview at the first call as often as possible. Knowledge of the local area – is it a high employment area? is there a high proportion of retired persons? – may help with this planning.

Experience will help teach an interviewer about the efficient use of the time they have been allocated for a particular survey. However, establishing good practice at an early stage in their training through the provision of practical examples (and later reinforced outside the classroom) will assist in this development.

Establishing Contact and Gaining Co-operation

Recent years have seen a large expansion in the number of surveys financed from both the public and private sectors but despite this, being interviewed is still not a common experience. Few members of the public will know what to expect when they are first approached by an interviewer. Where they have any awareness, it will most often be related to market research type activities which may not have been a positive experience. As a result, first impressions become very important if co-operation is to be achieved.

> **New interviewers need to be taught to expect to achieve an interview at every household they visit. A negative approach on the doorstep will almost always be self-fulfilling.**

As well as being confident of achieving an interview, the interviewer needs to reassure the respondent that their participation will not be a difficult or unpleasant experience.

Morton-Williams (1993) identified a set of behavioral traits that appear to be related to gaining co-operation:

- Appear trustworthy;
- Appear friendly;
- Be flexible, adjusting to the situation presented on the doorstep.

Identification badges are commonly used to address the first of these, while a smile or a well chosen compliment will usually satisfy the second.

4. Interviewer Training

An important recent addition to basic interviewer training has been the adoption of Avoiding Refusal Training (ART). First introduced by Groves and McGonagle (2001), ART "centers on exposing interviewers to the most common types of reluctance encountered by interviewers when seeking permission to conduct a specific survey and drilling them in how to respond skilfully and fluently" (McConaghy and Carey, 2005). In essence the training equips interviewers to respond quickly and appropriately to the respondents' concerns. Most successfully deployed among interviewers achieving below average response rates, it has also been adapted at ONS as part of the initial training provided for new interviewers.

Exercise 2: Social Survey Interview Training

The following are examples of statements given by members of the public when they have been approached by an interviewer to participate in a survey. Read the interviewer's response to each statement and determine if it is **appropriate** or **inappropriate** to encourage participation.

Statement: I'm not interested and I don't want to waste your time.

Response: That's very kind of you to worry about wasting my time. I can assure you that, in providing some basic information about your circumstances, you will be helping your local community plan for the future.

+ Appropriate   — Inappropriate

Statement: I don't want to do it, I am not going to do it and when I say no I mean no!

Response: It is a really important survey and your type of areas tend to get missed out of surveys and that is why it is really important that I get to speak to you.

+ Appropriate   — Inappropriate

Statement: I never do interviews or surveys ever.

Response: You know, a lot of people are participating in this study. We just spoke with your neighbour about it.

+ Appropriate   — Inappropriate

Statement: Anything to do with the Government is useless. They tell lies. The local council, they're no better. I told you the other day, I don't want to do it.

Response: This research will continue even if this government is thrown out tomorrow. We don't do it for the government; we do it for the population at large. Without statistics we would be unaware of the social, medical and educational needs of the population.

+ Appropriate   — Inappropriate

Statement: Whatever I say won't make a difference.

Response: Not participating could really affect your health care.

       [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

Statement: I'm very seldom here – I've got three jobs and have quite a bit of commuting to do. I can't see when I could do it!

Response: You are the sort of busy person we need to talk to. You represent the kind of change we are seeing in society today. It is important for us not to miss people like you.

       [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

Statement: Do I have to do it?

Response: No but it's a little selfish of you not to participate. We're trying to make a difference with this survey.

       [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

Statement: I'm worried about what you will do with my details.

Response: Your confidentiality is a worry these days. However, this is an anonymous survey. Nothing you say can be associated with the reports we produce.

       [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

Statement: There are too many surveys in the world. We are fed up with people calling here and asking questions.

Response: You can say no, but we'll just keep calling you to see if we can change your mind.

       [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

4. Interviewer Training

Conducting the Interview

New recruits will need to receive some basic guidance on how to set up and control the interview. Much of this will be common sense, but it is worth covering these points as it emphasizes the importance of trying to make the respondent's experience as pleasant as possible.

> **It is important to appreciate that the intervention is a manipulable alteration in the status quo and, in that important sense, observational studies are akin to experiments.**

They will have to locate an appropriate place to interview, usually a table with reasonable light for seeing the screen and reading showcards. However, it is also necessary to be prepared for other situations where conditions are not ideal: here it is a matter of managing the best they can.

Before starting the interview, the interviewer needs to make sure the respondent is settled and that, as far as possible, there are no distractions. It is generally best for the interviewer to sit facing the respondent.

> **A good interview should be as much like an informal conversation as possible.**

Eye contact should be kept between interviewer and respondent, particularly between asking questions and recording the answers. This will help to monitor reactions to questions which will in turn make it easier to control the interview. The ways in which respondents react to questions will tell the interviewer whether the interview is progressing at an appropriate speed and also indicate their level of understanding. This may in turn influence the degree to which questions need to be followed-up.

4. Interviewer Training

Interviewing Techniques

Along with instruction on how to gain co-operation, this element probably constitutes the majority of initial training. It is more theoretical and as such more suited to class orientated learning; it involves learning a set of rules governing the delivery of questions that have to be adhered to almost all of the time.

However, interviewing is not completely a mechanical process; avatars have not yet, nor are they ever likely, to replace humans.   A certain amount of intuition is required on areas such as when explanations are required and when to probe for further answers. While the researcher designing the questionnaire will indicate when such probing is permissible, whether or not to do this will be up to the discretion of the interviewer. This judgement will come with experience, supported by training. A good questionnaire limits the degree to which interviewers need to exercise discretion, but it does not lessen the importance of their role in the interview.

> **The one fundamental rule that applies to all questions and questionnaires is that interviewers must not vary the wording or order of questions except as permitted by the instructions.**

At initial training interviewing techniques need to be introduced and, through practice in a classroom setting, they can start to be ingrained to the extent that they become natural. This can then be followed up in real interviewing situations where the new interviewer is supported by a manager or more experienced interviewer. Interviewing techniques are a learned skill that will improve with practice. Any deficiencies should be pointed out and corrected through regular monitoring.

4. Interviewer Training

Interviewing Techniques continued

Interviewing techniques vary according to the type of question being asked. It is therefore important for interviewers to be aware that there are two main groups of questions. The first group is the questions that are asked to collect facts; the second is those whose purpose is to gather information on attitudes, opinions or level of knowledge. This distinction is important as it affects the way interviewers handle a question, particularly where it is necessary to follow up the initial answer.

As a general rule, opinion, attitude and knowledge questions are handled in a standard way, whereas factual questions can usually be handled more freely, for example by offering elaboration on question definitions. This does not mitigate the one fundamental rule that applies to all questions and questionnaires: that interviewers must not vary the wording or order of questions except as permitted by the instructions.

Interviewers will follow-up their initial delivery of a question by probing depending on the question asked and the information required.   Probes take on a number of different forms. For example, when probing a factual question an interviewer should:

- Make sure they are using the right type of question. Where possible it should be an 'open' question, that is, one that does not suggest an answer.
- Take care not to assume that the information given earlier in an interviewer applies to a later question. An interviewer should therefore confirm, not assume, when probing.
- Assist the respondent to remember. This might be by referring the respondent to a document that may have relevant information.
- Check for consistent answers. This may be done automatically by the CAI program and will require the interviewer to go over earlier information to confirm answers.

Rules will also exist for opinion and knowledge questions and here the interviewer should be aware of the following:

- If the respondent has difficulty answering such a question, it needs to be stressed that there are no right or wrong answers.
- If the respondent replies to an opinion or knowledge question by asking "what do you mean?", the interviewer should only ever repeat the question; they should not attempt to explain what it means.

This only touches on some of the issues regarding interviewing techniques. For a more detailed discussion there is a large literature devoted to this subject and some useful references include: Fowler, F. and Mangione, T. (1990); Salant, P. and Dillman, D. (1994); Survey Research Center (1983).

4. Interviewer Training

It should not be assumed that, once learned, interviewing techniques remain forever, as interviewers can fall into bad habits. One common bad habit is an interviewer assuming that they know an answer, usually from information given in conversation earlier in an interview. The respondent will probably not have given the precise answer when chatting and regardless, the need to ask a question is never mitigated. However, it is always good practice to acknowledge the information given earlier by saying, for example: "I think you mentioned this earlier but can I just check …"

> **Most survey organizations will supply interviewers with a manual describing the broad principles of social survey interviewing.**

It will help to affirm the training received at the initial course, but it will also act as a reference point for more established interviewers with the intention that they will use it throughout the course of their career.

4. Interviewer Training

Making Consistency of Delivery Achievable

> **To promote better data quality, questions need to be presented in a consistent manner, following an agreed set of rules.**

When designing questionnaires researchers can encourage consistency in delivery by developing a set of standards and rules that govern how questions should be asked. This is relatively easy to do with the software that is available for CAI. These standards need not only to be applied consistently within a given survey, but in order to reap benefits in terms of improving data quality, they should apply to all questionnaires that are managed by a survey organization.

At ONS all our surveys are carried out using CAI and are programmed in Blaise (software developed by Statistics Netherlands). Figure 1 illustrates the standard layout that is used for all surveys. Icons are used to illustrate a common task such as the use of showcards, and colored text is used to differentiate between instructions – in blue - and question text – in black – that need to be read out.

Figure 1: Basic Screen Layout

Continuous Population Survey - CPS0509d

Forms   Answer   Navigate

👁 A6

★Thinking about your personal preferences towards smoking, which statement best describes the smoking restrictions you would prefer in a pub?

ⓘ If respondent never goes to pubs because of religious or cultural reasons, or if they just don't like pubs and never go there, please code as 'Refusal' (press «Ctrl + R»). If they never go to pubs because they find them too full of smoke, please ask them to choose one of the options.

○ 1. No smoking allowed anywhere
○ 2. Mainly non-smoking but with separate smoking areas
○ 3. Mainly smoking but with separate non-smoking areas
○ 4. Smoking allowed throughout the pub

○ 5. Don't know (Spontaneous Only)

M130_42

1904/2093   Navigate   CPS0509d

4. Interviewer Training

Other rules can be introduced to promote consistency in questionnaire delivery. For example, it is standard for interviewers to continue reading text up until a question mark (?) appears. This is illustrated in Figure 2. For this question, the interviewer would be expected to read out all the response options up until "6. Other ethnic group?" Contrast this with Figure 3 where the interviewer is instructed to read only until the end of the question text – "… currently practicing?" and not to read out the response categories. How a question is delivered should be a decision made by the researcher and not at the discretion of the interviewer. This is only possible if rules are established and these are presented to the interviewer in a consistent manner.

Figure 2: Example Question Presentation

Figure 3: Example Question Presentation

4. Interviewer Training

Recording Answers

There are three basic principles that interviewers should always follow when recording answers.

1. Answers must be recorded accurately
2. They must be recorded at the time of interview
3. They must be recorded directly to the mode of data collection unless there are specific instructions to do differently

For many questions there will be instructions on what codes are permissible, for example if one or more codes can be used. These instructions should appear on screen (for example, see Figure 4) and while it is possible to place checks to limit mis-keying (e.g. to stop multiple responses where only one is allowed) these do not do away with the requirement of interviewers to follow instructions carefully.

Figure 4: Example Question Presentation

4. Interviewer Training

Stage 2: On-the-Job Training

In order to reinforce the initial training, it is important that these lessons be followed up with regular support in the first few months. New interviewers should be accompanied when they start working either by their manager, a trainer, or an experienced interviewer. In these early days, regular feedback should be provided to make the new interviewer aware of any areas where improvements can be made. Progress can be judged in many ways: the observer can provide feedback and it can also be sought from the respondent.

> **Objective measures such as the response rates achieved, length of interview time, and the amount of post-data collection editing that is required (to name but a few), can all be used to evaluate performance.**

Having a structured program of support for new interviewers is vital, not only to help them as they cope with the inevitable rejection from non-compliant respondents, but also to safeguard against the development of bad habits.

4. Interviewer Training

⚙ Exercise 3: Measuring Indebtedness

You have been commissioned to undertake a new survey the primary aim of which is to measure household indebtedness. It has been specified that the survey is to be conducted face-to-face and will last approximately two hours per household. Participating households will be asked to complete an expenditure and income diary lasting a month and permission will be sought to link their survey data to administrative records.

Your interviewers need to be briefed.

Step 1 of 2: Select the appropriate information to be provided to the interviewers:

Overview of the study   [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

Specific research hypotheses   [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

Location of respondents to be interviewed   [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

Sampling procedures   [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

Selling the survey   [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

Detailed discussion of reasons for each question   [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

Summary of any special procedures that need to be followed, e.g. advising respondents on how to complete the diary, getting their permission to link administrative data to their survey records   [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

General field issues and processes, e.g. how often interviewers should be in contact with their controllers, how often they need to send work back etc.   [+ Appropriate]   [− Inappropriate]

You have been commissioned to undertake a new survey the primary aim of which is to measure household indebtedness. It has been specified that the survey is to be conducted face-to-face and will last approximately two hours per household. Participating households will be asked to complete an expenditure and income diary lasting a month and permission will be sought to link their survey data to administrative records.

Your interviewers need to be briefed.

Step 1 of 2: Select the appropriate information to be provided to the interviewers:
- Overview of the study
- Location of respondents to be interviewed
- Sampling procedures
- Selling the survey
- Summary of any special procedures that need to be followed, e.g. advising respondents on how to complete the diary, getting their permission to link administrative data to their survey records
- General field issues and processes, e.g. how often interviewers should be in contact with their controllers, how often they need to send work back etc.

Step 2 of 2: Determining best briefing approach:

Assume there are 3 experienced interviewers with varying level of experience specifically on household indebtedness surveys. The survey is 2 hours long and requires capturing data on income. What type of briefing would you plan for your staff?

Group Training Session

One on one Sessions

Prior to starting work on a survey an interviewer needs to be briefed about the tasks they will be undertaking. How this is done will vary according to the complexity of the survey. For relatively straightforward surveys it may be sufficient to provide interviewers with paper instructions. Added to this might be an expectation that the interviewer completes a number of practice interviews to familiarize themselves with the survey.

For more complex surveys a face-to-face briefing will be required. This is where a number of interviewers – usually about 10-15 – are brought together in a classroom setting to receive instruction on a survey. From a cost point of view it is not usually worth doing this for less than half a day: most briefings will last for a day although for more complex surveys two or three days may be necessary.

4. Interviewer Training

> **There is sometimes a fine line between necessary and unnecessary knowledge of the research, thus it is not easy to determine exactly what the interviewer needs to know.**

While interviewers are not required to be topic experts, they should have a full understanding of the following:

- What is the survey about?
- What are we asking the respondent to do?
- The survey procedures e.g. if there is sampling, how to do this, rules for inclusion and exclusion.
- Who is the survey for?
- What is it to be used for?

Interviewers who are not fully familiar with these run the risk of losing the confidence of the respondent. This may result in a reduced likelihood of gaining cooperation, or may compromise the quality of the data being collected.

To a varying degree they will also need to be taught about the details of the questionnaire, beyond basic familiarity with its content. For example, in some circumstances they will need to know the definitions that lie behind the questions. It can be difficult to know how much knowledge is required. They do not need to be subject experts – that is the role of the researcher – but they have to be provided with sufficient information in order to confidently answer respondent questions. In particular, they need to understand the intended meaning of questions when probing is permissible. However, too much detail may just confuse the interviewer and possibly result in them leading the respondent's answers, biasing results.

It has become standard practice on all ONS surveys for interviewers to complete Electronic Learning Questionnaires (ELQs) prior to starting work. These test interviewers on their knowledge of the survey, highlighting the main points covered in survey instructions and pre-

briefing materials. When completed, the ELQs are returned and graded. If they show insufficient knowledge the interviewer will not work on the survey.

5. Continuous Interviewer Learning

> **Interviewers should never stop learning and should always be open to improving themselves.**

To encourage continuous learning it is necessary to have in place a suite of training packages that interviewers and their managers can use on an ongoing basis.

Examples of these include:

- Non-contact workshops where interviewers discuss strategies for minimizing non-contacts (and encouraging contacts at an earlier stage);
- Deciding how and when to use interpreters;
- Best practice when classifying response, for example when coding occupation and industry.

A recent addition to this is training on how to interview persons with impairments. When working on any survey it is important that each eligible individual is given an equal opportunity to take part. In addition, the survey experience should be the same for all: it should not be more difficult or less pleasant just because of the respondent's individual circumstances. To promote these objectives a set of guidelines has been developed instructing interviewers on what they should do when faced with a respondent who has an impairment. While this sets out what is considered best practice when interviewing someone, for example, with a visual, hearing, physical or learning impairment, it is also stressed that no two persons will have the same needs. The same condition may have a major effect on one person but a minor effect on another. While there are occasions when a disability does severely affect the ability of a person to participate in an interview, in most cases it is no barrier to being a fully effective respondent. The key is to not make any assumptions.

6. Monitoring Interviewers in the Field

Interviewers need to routinely be monitored in the field, both for the progress they are making and for their performance.

Most surveys will have a set period for fieldwork and it is good practice to establish milestones for interviewer progress. Where these are not being met there will be a need for intervention. Slow progress may be for work-related reasons –- e.g. working in a difficult area, completing work on other surveys (it is common for interviewers to work on more than one survey at any one time.) -- or due to interviewers' own personal circumstances (e.g. illness, unexpected events). In some circumstances it may be necessary to transfer work from one interviewer to another. Depending on the extent of the management information (any information relating to the survey and personnel working on it) available, it may be possible to direct interviewers to work on specific cases as the survey period comes to an end. These may be hard-to-interview-at households – flats, households with access controls – which would otherwise be inclined to be under-represented in the collected data.

> **As well as monitoring progress, it is important to track interviewer performance.**

The quality of a survey can be seriously undermined by nonresponse. Nonresponse error creates difficulties, for we often know little about the people or households who do not participate.

However, it is now more common for interviewers to collect some information about non-responding households. This will usually be by observation, for example, the type of property being sampled (flat, detached, semi-detached, terraced etc.) Typically, interviewer performance will be evaluated by the following measures of survey nonresponse which should be calculated according to standard AAPOR definitions.

- Response rate
- Contact rate
- Cooperation rate

6. Monitoring Interviewers in the Field

CAI and improved connectivity has made it easier to get timely information on the above. This allows for intervention at an earlier stage which might mean training, or more proactively, reallocating cases from one interviewer to another.

In addition to collecting nonresponse data it is also important to analyze other performance metrics, such as calling patterns. Interviewers need to call on households at different times and days of the week in order to maximize the likelihood of contact. Where there is insufficient variety in contact patterns managers can intervene and advise alternatives.

> **It is useful to collect information about all stages of the survey process as these data can be used to illuminate poor interviewer practice.**

For example, at ONS interviewers record whether they leave any items of correspondence when they visit an address. This might be a card saying they have called when no one was home, a letter explaining the importance of the survey and so on. However, when these data were analyzed, a correspondence emerged between interviewers who left materials at every visit and lower response rates. Receiving correspondence, especially multiple items, was encouraging sampled households to call the head office and refuse participation; there was usually a free phone number on the letter or card which connected to a call center at ONS. With this information it has been possible to encourage interviewers to adopt a more considered approach to using survey print materials.

6. Monitoring Interviewers in the Field

Regular checks of the quality of the data collected are also important. This can be done in a number of ways:

- Observing the interviewer while in the field;
- A personal recall on both responding and non-responding households;
- Postal or telephone recalls; and
- Recording segments of interviews – with permission - for review.

When observing an interviewer it helps if there is a standard method to report findings. This handout is an example of the type of information that can be collected.

More quantitative analysis can be used to evaluate the quality of data being collected by an interviewer. For example, a high item non-response may be an indication that an interviewer is not adequately explaining a question.

> **Care needs to be taken to not rely on evidence from a single observation. It is best to collect evidence over a number of interviews and over a period of time to ensure that any findings are indeed typical of their performance.**

Interviewers need to be aware that such measures are in place to monitor their performance. Equally, they need to know what is important in terms of data quality. Interviewers may have only a vague concept of quality and performance and often it is simplified into the pursuit of a high response rate. Researchers need to explicitly state what they are after – for example, where high item non-response on certain questions may jeopardize the value of a particular interview, interviewers need to be made aware of this.

6. Monitoring Interviewers in the Field

Where performance issues of any kind have been identified, these need to be followed up with the course of action depending on the type and extent of the problem. The first step will always be to make the interviewer aware of the problem, to confirm its authenticity and to identify probable causes. Only then should solutions be discussed. Possible options to address performance issues may include:

- Re-training, which might include attending a survey briefing, practicing specific elements (e.g. coding classifications);
- Additional support by having a manager or experienced interviewer accompany the interviewer in need of assistance;
- More explicit rules to guide interviewer behavior (e.g. providing the interviewer with additional guidance on appropriate calling patterns).

Monitoring interviewer performance also assists in managing survey costs. Achieving high response rates is an expensive business, and since interviewing costs usually account for the highest percentage of total survey costs, it is important to have good metrics to account for the time interviewers spend on a project.

7. Summary

Organizing social survey data collection is a complex business primarily because it involves engaging with a public that may be less than enthusiastic about participation. While ultimately the respondents will decide whether they will take part in a survey, the survey manager can maximize the chances of cooperation through appropriate organization of field resources.

> **Other factors such as the design of the survey, use of incentives etc. can influence participation; however the role of the interviewer should never be underestimated.**

This chapter has presented a range of methods that can be applied to maximize the efficiency and success of social survey interviewers as they attempt to deliver high quality and cost effective data. There is no simple solution to deliver this; rather, a holistic approach is required, covering all aspects of the interviewer role.

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9. Author Biography

Stephen Woodland is currently the Head of Survey Operations at the Office for National Statistics (UK) where he has responsibility for all household data collection activities. The ONS is the Government Department responsible for collecting and publishing official statistics about the UK's society and economy. Approximately 1,300 Interviewers are employed covering both face-to-face and telephone data collection.

Stephen has over 15 years experience working in social research in both the private and public sectors. He has designed and managed some of the largest household surveys in the UK including the Labour Force Survey.

Stephen actively participates in a number of International forums looking at improving data collection processes and has been a regular participant at the International Field Directors and Technologies Conference.