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

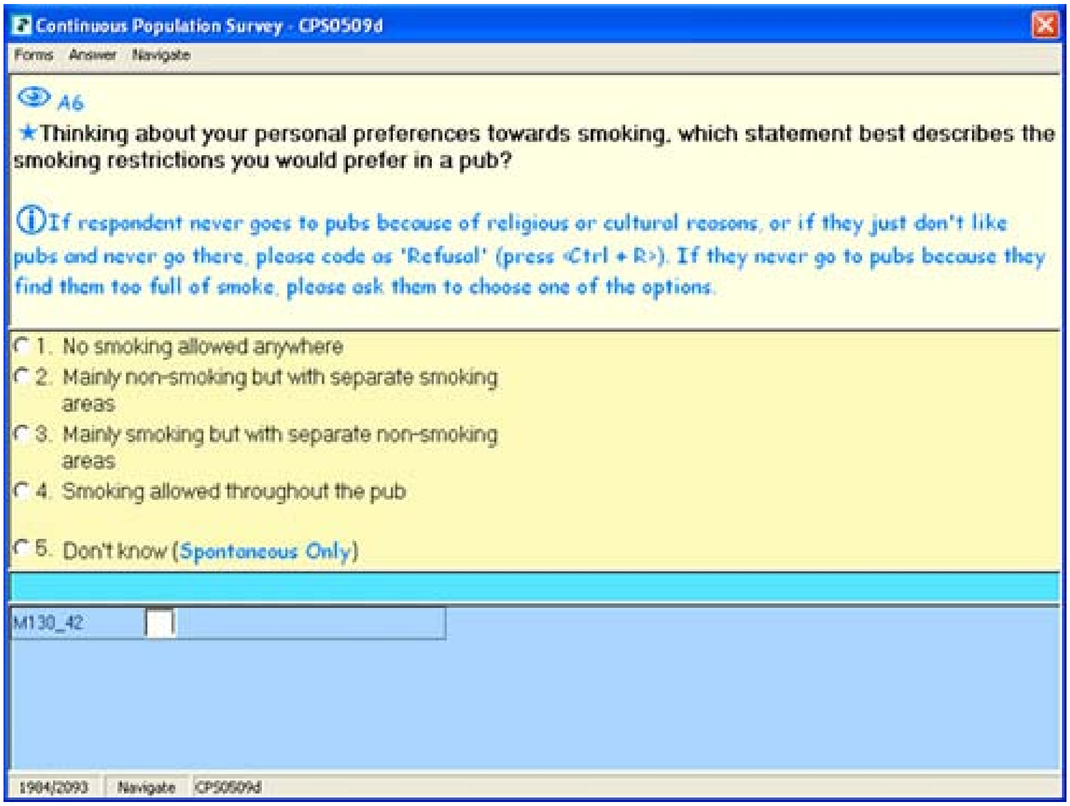
Making Consistency of Delivery Achievable

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



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

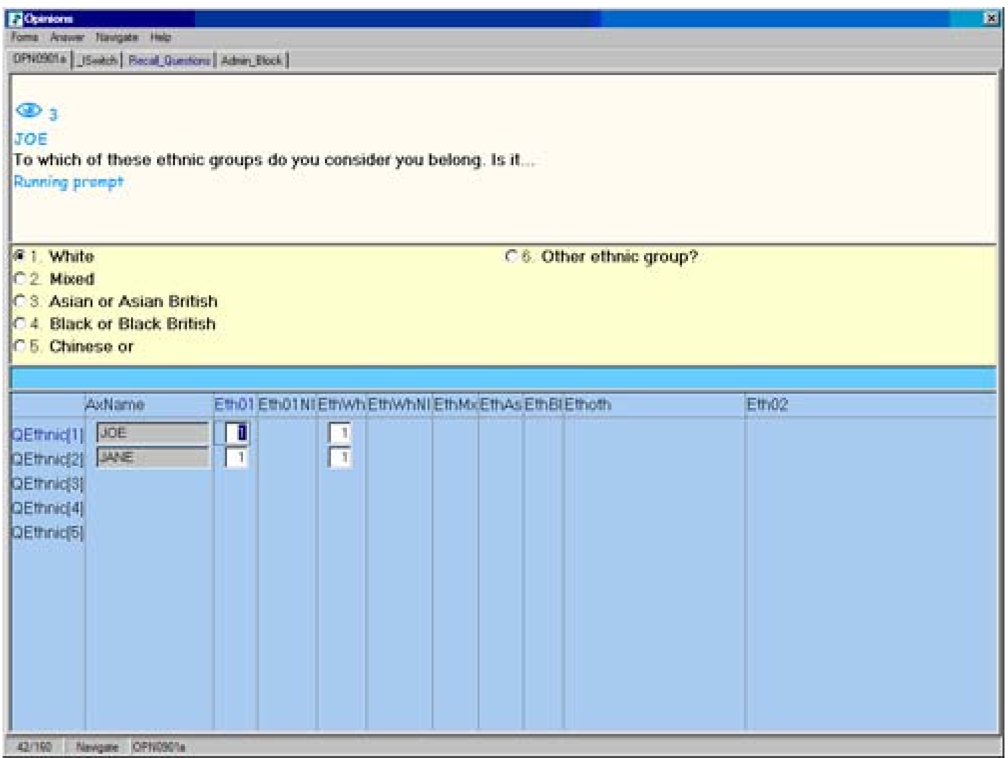
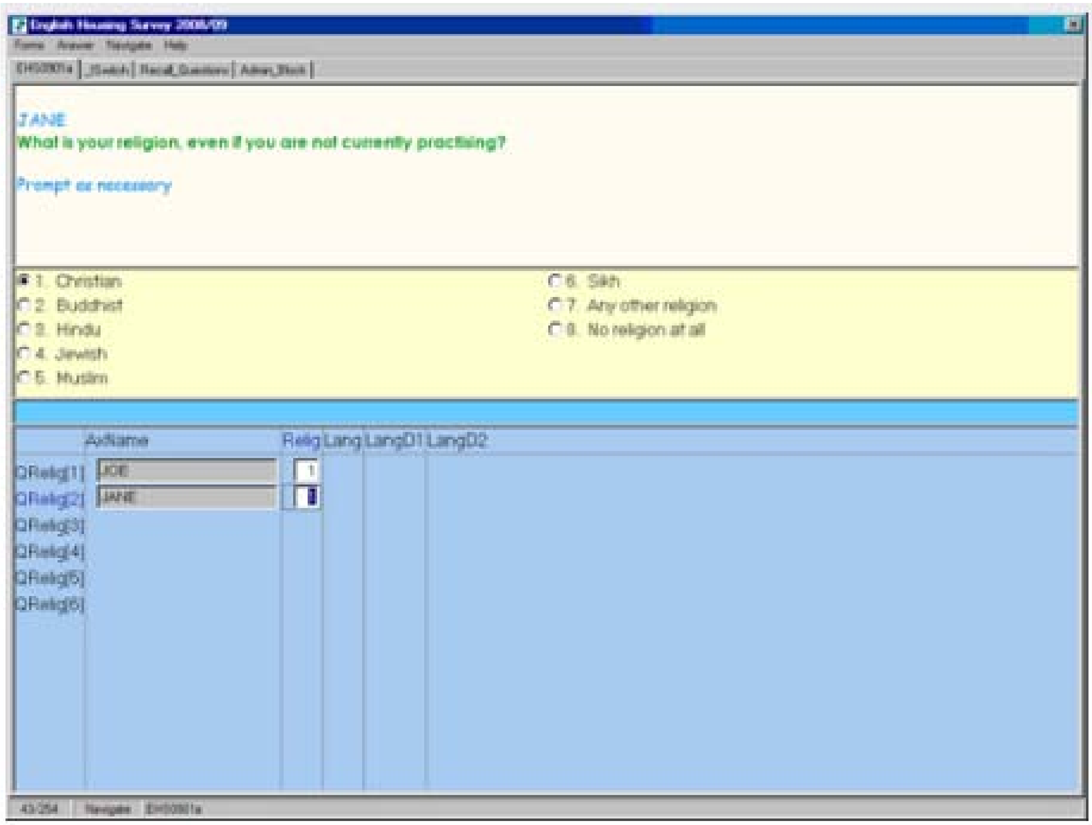


Figure 3: Example Question Presentation



4. Interviewer Training

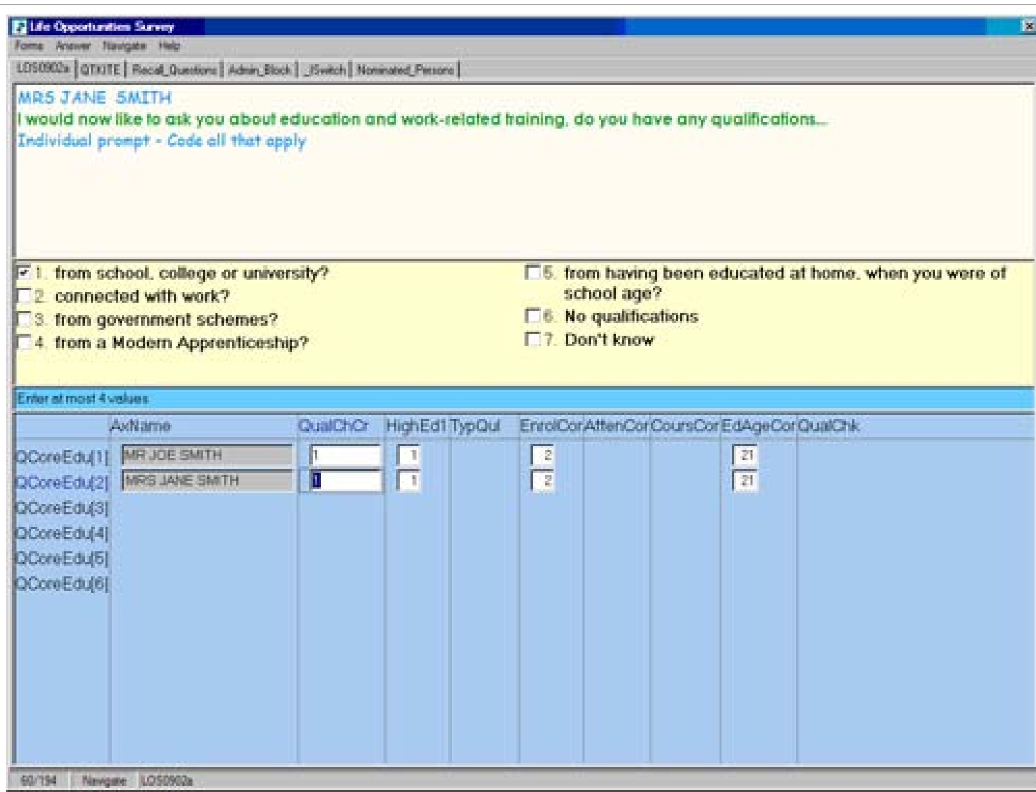
Recording Answers

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

Stage 3: Survey-Specific 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 prebriefing 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.