# Organisation of fieldwork

10

## Interviewer training

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**Explanation of symbols**

| | |
|---|---|
| . | = data not available |
| * | = provisional figure |
| ** | = revised provisional figure |
| x | = publication prohibited (confidential figure) |
| – | = nil or less than half of unit concerned |
| – | = (between two figures) inclusive |
| 0 (0,0) | = less than half of unit concerned |
| blank | = not applicable |
| 2010–2011 | = 2010 to 2011 inclusive |
| 2010/2011 | = average of 2010 up to and including 2011 |
| 2010/'11 | = crop year, financial year, school year etc. beginning in 2010 and ending in 2011 |
| 2008/'09–2010/'11 | = crop year, financial year, etc. 2008/'09 to 2010/'11 inclusive |

Due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

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## 1. Introduction

Statistics Netherlands aims to produce statistics to a high quality. Data are collected on a large scale from individuals, households and companies. Interviewers are engaged for some of the data collection, in particular for individuals and households. Interviewers have the following responsibilities:

- The first is that they are required to administer questionnaires that may be difficult, and sometimes lengthy, in a standard way. Interviewers must present every question to respondents. For closed questions, interviewers are required to read out not only the question, but also a limited number of answers, from which the respondent can make a choice. The questions and response options must be read verbatim and in the sequence given in the questionnaire (Houtkamp, 2002).

  Standardization is an important factor in ensuring comparability of outcomes, since without standardization interviewer effects would be considerable. However, standardization may be detrimental to answer quality and validity. Quality and validity may conflict with standardization when the rules of standardized interviewing clash with the conventions of ordinary conversation (Houtkamp, 2002). For instance, the natural flow of a conversation demands adaptation to the other person based on what you know about him and anything he may have disclosed previously in the interview. Standardization hampers interviewers in adapting in this way. However, standardization is vital for ensuring comparability of the figures.

- The second responsibility is that interviewers must motivate respondents to do their best and answer the questions as well as they can, and avoid resorting to 'satisficing', or giving up half-way through the questionnaire.

- The third responsibility is that interviewers must persuade potential respondents to participate in a survey. Interviewers have a major influence on response. Surveys conducted on the web or by post achieve an average response of between 30 and 40 per cent. Statistics Netherlands interviewers in telephone or face-to-face surveys achieve an average response of 65 per cent.

Furthermore, interviewers serve as an organization's eyes and ears, in that they are able to feed back information about the progress of surveys in the field and where any obstacles lie. They can also play an important part in questionnaire evaluation. Statistics Netherlands engages them on this task by presenting them with (electronic) evaluation questionnaires.

The duties listed above are extremely varied. There is a difference between the behaviour expected of interviewers when attempting to recruit potential respondents and when administering structured questionnaires (Groves and Couper, 1998). Interviewers must adhere strictly to the rules and the prescribed phrasing of questions when administering questionnaires. However, when introducing surveys,

interviewers are expected to be able to improvise and to adapt to how an individual respondent reacts.

It is important for interviewers to be trained well, so that they can perform their various responsibilities satisfactorily. Thorough interviewer training helps raise response rates, and is crucial to the quality of the collected data. Care must also be taken to ensure that, once acquired, skills are not lost, which creates a need for refresher courses. If interviewers were to be unable to perform the above tasks well, there would be no point whatsoever in having interviewer-administered surveys. They would be far too expensive.

This report covers the points for attention in setting up and defining an interviewer training course. The form of training courses at Statistics Netherlands is also addressed. Chapter 2 discusses the important types of interviewer training, viz. basic training and the study-specific training. Chapter 3 discusses the importance of training in techniques of persuasion, tailoring and maintaining interaction. Chapter 4 discusses course duration, practical course details and e-learning. Chapter 5 presents some brief conclusions.

## 2. Types of training courses

### 2.1 Introduction

Interviewer training usually falls into two types: general training about the surveying process (basic training) and study-specific training courses (Groves and Couper, 1998). Opinions vary about the exact details of these two types of training. For instance, Morton-Williams (1993) assigns the course component 'gaining cooperation' to both basic and study-specific training. Groves and Couper (1998) refer to this same component only in study-specific training. However, there is general agreement about the subjects to be handled.

### 2.2 Basic training

A basic training course usually has the following components (Groves and Couper, 1998).

- Handling administrative aspects.
  Instructions for recording hours worked, the receipt and return of sample materials, communication with supervisors, etc.
- Identifying sample units.
  Interviewers must be instructed in how to identify sample units (individuals or households) that are assigned to them. Attention must also be given to correcting any errors in the identity,and recording the results of attempts to contact a sample unit.
- Contacting sample units.
  Interviewers must be given information about how best to approach sample units in order to maximize the probability of making contact. Important aspects are the best times and days on which to attempt to make a call. Rigid guidelines for call paterns are sometimes given, and they apply to Statistics Netherlands too. These rules are intended to prevent the selective approach of potential respondents by interviewers. They are also intended to encourage interviewers to choose a favourable strategy that will achieve a maximum response for the least expense.
- Administering the questionnaire.
  Finally, instruction must be given about the actual interview. Several subjects are covered, including: reading the questions exactly as written, recording the answers, discerning whether an answer to a question is adequate, and probing – nondirectively – when answers are inadequate.

### 2.3 Study-specific training

The basic training can be augmented with study-specific training courses. Groves and Couper (1998) identify the following components.

- Administering the questionnaire.

Most study-specific training addresses questionnaire administration and the associated problems. Interviewers are given instruction in key definitions of terms, in the intent of each question, in what constitutes adequate answers, the questionnaire structure, and how to deal with difficult circumstances.

- Gaining cooperation.

  A study-specific training course often also addresses how to obtain potential respondents' cooperation. Interviewers are given instruction about the general survey objective and are provided with answers to questions that are frequently asked about the survey. Other matters that may be addressed include confidentiality regarding the information obtained. Some organizations have interviewers rehearse how to deal with reluctant respondents through role play.

### 2.4 Types of training courses at Statistics Netherlands

Statistics Netherlands attaches great value to high quality interviewing work. All interviewers are therefore given basic training before they set out. This basic training is part of the candidate selection process for the position of interviewer (the final part of the process). The basic training has so far concluded with recommendations from the trainers about the suitability of the candidates for the position of interviewer. The recommendation is based on an assessment of the command of general competencies that are important for interviewers, such as good communication skills, accurate and careful work and strict adherence to the Statistics Netherlands working method. Candidates must also have performed all the assignments in the basic training (gaining cooperation, interview technique, use of software) to a satisfactory level.

The basic training for face-to-face interviewers and telephone interviewers focuses on the following subjects:

- approaching sample units: instructions about the field work strategy to be followed, mainly oriented to enhancing the probability of contact (only for face-to-face interviewers);
- identifying the sample units;
- interview technique, such as 'asking questions verbatim' and 'probing, interpreting and leading';
- use of software, electronic questionnaires and laptops (face-to-face) or a network PC (telephone);
- gaining cooperation and persuasion;
- handling administrative matters: forwarding the collected data to Statistics Netherlands, recording hours worked, and the receipt and return of survey materials (only for face-to-face interviewers);
- instruction for a single specific survey, covering all relevant elements of a survey that the interviewers will perform after the course.

The content of the basic training largely corresponds with the recommendations given in the literature.

Alongside the basic training, Statistics Netherlands runs various study-specific training courses. During these training courses the interviewers are given instruction on at least the following subjects:

- objective and background of the survey;
- the client(s);
- design, e.g. address-based or individual sample, modes, why a given mode was chosen, extensive explanation of the part of the design that is important to the interviewers;
- interviewer materials, e.g. questionnaire(s), answer cards, booklets, advance letters;
- administering the questionnaire: content and structure.

The subject ‘gaining cooperation’ is not a mandatory part of study-specific training at Statistics Netherlands, but does occur frequently in various study-specific training courses. On the one hand care is taken to ensure that this aspect appears on the agenda on a regular basis. This mainly happens in training courses for large surveys, for which many of the interviewers require training. On the other hand the subject of some studies is so ‘heavy’ that a conscious decision is made to address the persuasion of respondents in the training course.

## 3. Persuasion techniques, tailoring and maintaining interaction

### 3.1 Introduction

Although interviewer training often differs from one country and organization to another, the emphasis in most training courses is on administering the questionnaire. The time devoted to the aspect of 'gaining cooperation' is often only a small fraction of the total training time (Groves and Couper, 1998).

However, it is important that the training courses give sufficient attention to this subject. Training gives 'natural talents' an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their skills and to improve them. The course will help interviewers who lack natural aptitude to acquire the necessary basic skills faster, and often also better, than they would in the hard world of practice (Morton-Williams, 1993).

### 3.2 Tailoring and maintaining interaction

Groves and Couper (1998) consider the primary elements of a persuasion techniques course to be the concepts of 'tailoring' and 'maintaining interaction'. Tailoring is concerned with the strategic adaptations the interviewer makes in order to persuade a specific respondent, thereby increasing the probability of response. The interviewer needs to obtain information from the respondent in order to apply tailoring. It is therefore important for an interviewer to be able to maintain the interaction with the respondent with a view to acquiring the relevant information. Another benefit of maintaining interaction is that it will then be less likely that the interviewer will be sent away. The longer the conversation, the more difficult it will be for a respondent to dismiss the interviewer. However, when respondents signal fairly early on that they have no time for an interview, it is advisable to try to make an appointment for a different time (Becks, 2008).

### 3.3 Refusal avoidance training

Groves and McGonagle (2001) have devised a persuasion techniques course for interviewers around the concept of tailoring. This 'refusal avoidance training' (also known as refusal aversion training) takes the form of an eight-hour module consisting of lectures and interactive exercises with an increasing degree of difficulty. The authors have conducted two experiments to test the effect of this training on response. Experiment 1 was oriented to persuading respondents (by telephone) in the first contact. Experiment 2 was oriented to follow-up approaches (by telephone) to nonrespondents of a written survey. Both experiments involved business surveys. The two separate studies found that the response figures achieved by the interviewers improved after taking the course by approximately 10 percentage points[1]. The effect of the training appears to be significantly greater for low

[1] The interviewers performed their work in two periods:
phase 1: before the persuasion techniques course;
phase 2: after the persuasion techniques course.

performers than for those who already performed well before the course. Experiment 2 involved a control group, for which the response in the second investigation phase increased by 2.7 percentage points compared with the first phase. These results suggest that the substantially improved response is not merely a consequence of interviewers' increased work experience.

Mayer and O'Brien (2001) report an experiment performed by the US Census Bureau. They investigated the effect of Groves' and McGonagle's (2001) refusal avoidance training on a telephone household survey. The conclusion is that for interviewers who took the course the response figures (for the first contact) increased by between 3 and 7 percentage points. In the long term[2] the response rate even increased by 14 percentage points compared with that achieved by interviewers who had not taken the course. The interviewers need time to master the skills.

### 3.4 Application at Statistics Netherlands

Considerable attention is devoted to skills for tailoring and maintaining interaction as part of the subject 'gaining cooperation' in the basic training and several study-specific training courses. The interviewers are given exercises (including role plays) to help them master the skills.

Furthermore, by way of experiment, Statistics Netherlands developed a two-day refusal avoidance (RAT) course (Luiten, 2006), based on the work of Groves and McGonagle (2001), Mayer and O'Brien (2001) and others. Analyses of the participation rates achieved (response if contact is made with the sample unit) show that only the less successful interviewers gained from the course. Their participation rate rose by 6 percentage points. The higher participation rates can be translated into a 2.3 percentage points higher response in the first six months after training. There was no further positive development in interviewer performance in the ensuing period. One year after training the increased participation rates resulted in only another 1 percentage point rise in response compared with before training. The long-term learning outcome mentioned above (Section 3.3) was not confirmed in this experiment. Repeating the course may contribute to maintaining the positive effects in the long term.

[2] Last measurement point 4 weeks after the course.

## 4. Training course structure

### 4.1 Introduction

Besides content, course duration and practical details also influence the effectiveness of interviewer training. These subjects are discussed in this chapter. A new form of learning known as e-learning is also covered.

### 4.2 Course duration

The amount of training interviewers receive influences how they do their work. It is hard to say how much time should be spent on study-specific training, or to prescribe the details of the courses concerned. This has to do with the large range of complexity and size of the data collection tasks in different surveys (Fowler and Mangione, 1991).

Fowler and Mangione (1991) investigated the effect of the duration of a basic training course on interviewer performance. They compared the effect of four training courses with durations of ½ a day, 2 days, 5 days and 10 days. The content and techniques of the training courses given to the interviewers were identical. The study leads to the following conclusions and recommendations:

- Interviewers who took only a half-day course performed far less well than those who received longer training (except in terms of recording the answers to closed questions). A majority of these interviewers performed unsatisfactorily on reading out the questions and probing.
- A longer course duration has a favourable influence on interviewer probing skills (a very important task in acquiring valid observations).
- Too much training can be counterproductive, in that interviewers may lose interest, resulting in poor task performance. When they conducted a practice interview, interviewers who took the 10-day course performed somewhat less well than those who had been on the 2-day and 5-day courses.
- The optimum basic training duration depends on group size, the complexity of the surveys that the interviewers will work on, and possibly also the type of supervision they will receive after the training course. Fowler and Mangione generally recommend a course duration of between two and four days. It is important for interviewers to have an opportunity during the course to be coached while practising their skills.

### 4.3 Practical course details

Numerous teaching methods are appropriate for interviewer training (Fowler and Mangione, 1991):

- a manual;
- lectures;
- demonstrations;

- practical assignments with interviewer coaching;
- post-training monitoring of interviewer performance.

Morton Williams (1993) gives the following points for attention for practical course details.

- A learning process is more likely to be effective if multiple teaching methods are used. Long lectures and long reading sessions should be avoided. It is better to divide them into sections and augment them with other methods that demand the course participant's active participation (discussion, role play, etc.).
- Role play is an important part of social skills training. Role play must be followed by feedback, from both trainers and fellow course participants.
- Group training sessions are more effective if the number of participants is limited (6-12), to allow for maximum participation.
- Home study can contribute to the training process, provided it is organized so as to demand active learning and output from course participants.
- There are limits to what an interviewer can effectively learn without practical experience. Interviewer training must therefore be viewed as a continuous process, in which refresher courses and suchlike are scheduled at appropriate times.

## 4.4 E-learning

### *4.4.1 What is e-learning?*

An enormous shift has been occurring for several years in the approach to teaching and training. There is a growing need for teaching methods that are flexible and not tied to a time and venue. E-learning satisfies these wishes. A great many companies have applied e-learning solutions in recent years (Zhang and Nunamaker, 2003). E-learning has much to offer interviewer training, and may in future lead to major changes in the nature of interviewer training courses. Statistics Netherlands is currently redesigning the basic training for interviewers, and e-learning will have an important role.

There are various definitions of the e-learning concept in circulation. Rosenberg's (2001) is: e-learning refers to the use of Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance. E-learning is based on three fundamental criteria:

- E-learning is networked, which makes it capable of immediate storage, retrieval, updating, distribution and sharing of information or instruction;
- it is provided to the end-user via a computer, using standard Internet technology;
- it focuses on the broadest view of learning. E-learning goes beyond the provision of training by also giving information and tools for improving performance (knowledge management).

E-learning can be applied either synchronously or asynchronously (Rosenberg, 2001; Zhang and Nunamaker, 2003).

- Synchronous: this form of e-learning requires all course participants and trainers to take part simultaneously (from various locations). The learning opportunity is provided in real time, and course participants and trainers are able to communicate with each other directly. The best known form of synchronous e-learning is web-based group training.
- Asynchronous: course participants are not required to take part simultaneously in this form of e-learning. Individual course participants can learn when it suits them. Course participants also decide for themselves how much attention or time they devote to the various course modules.

### *4.4.2 E-learning versus traditional classroom training*

Although e-learning offers many facilities and opportunities for employee training, this is not to say that the end is nigh for traditional classroom training courses (Rosenberg, 2001). This traditional form of training will continue to have a unique role in learning strategies that are applied, although the role is bound to change.

- Classroom training will no longer be the standard format for courses.
- Although classroom training will be applied less frequently, the importance of the remaining classroom experience is substantial. The best way to teach certain subjects or skills is still in the classroom, with course participants and trainers interacting directly (see Section 4.4.3).
- The emphasis in classroom training will be less on teaching facts and procedures and more on facilitating the learning process.
- Written course manuals will be treated differently in view of the speed with which they become outdated. At the very least it will be more common for manuals to be accessed on Internet, allowing convenient and rapid modification. In some cases manuals will even be replaced entirely by company information on the web.
- It will become less important when courses and programmes start and end. The use of Internet allows learning to begin before the start of the course and continue long after it has ended. Furthermore, the variation in people's background, knowledge, motivation and availability will make it increasingly hard to find enough people who are available simultaneously for the same classroom course.

### *4.4.3 Points for attention in setting up a training or educational programme*

Several important questions have to be answered when setting up an educational programme (Rosenberg, 2001).

- Where is e-learning not appropriate?

Justice can be better done to some subjects in a classroom setting than through e-learning. Some of these subjects are group interaction, observation by experts, development of corporate culture, and skills training. Determining where e-learning should be deployed and where it is not appropriate is one of the most important decisions that have to be taken.

- How can e-learning be used to supplement classroom training?

  There are many ways of doing so, mainly in the area of enrichment and continued study. For instance, a 'community' could be set up to allow course participants to maintain contact with each other and keep in touch with the area of knowledge concerned (also after the course has ended).

- How should the e-learning and classroom learning components be sequenced?

  One option would be to arrange classroom training in a short intensive period, possibly with a view to limiting course participants' travelling expenses. However, it will often be better to spread the classroom sessions out, allowing scope in the intervening periods for online learning, coaching and the integration of new and pre-existing knowledge.

- How much time should be allowed between the various components?

  If the modules are scheduled too close together, there will be a risk of leaving insufficient time for practice and gaining experience with the material learned. Conversely, if there is too much time between the modules, there will be a risk of weakening the link between them, while increasing the total programme costs.

- How can on-the-job experience be integrated into the educational programme?

  Besides formal learning opportunities, employees also learn a great deal through the experience gained while actually performing the work, and, with the correct coaching and support, this can be extremely effective.

- How will the effectiveness of the overall educational programme be measured?

## 4.5 Training course structure at Statistics Netherlands

### *4.5.1 Basic training*

The Statistics Netherlands basic training for face-to-face interviewers takes the form of oral instruction (classroom training), spread over 8 training days. The elapsed time is 2 months, and the group size is twelve.

There is a mix of theory and discussion, practical exercises and role play, to enable interviewers to master the material. The objective of the basic training is immediate employability. Interviewers are issued with the 'interviewer basic training' manual in advance. As the course proceeds, additional manuals are issued for use in the various programmes (e.g. instructions for the computer, search engines and questionnaire coding modules).

Interviewers also perform practical survey-related exercises during the training (they approach addresses), assisted by an experienced fellow interviewer (in the role of

coach). The elapsed time chosen is enough to allow all aspects of working as a field interviewer to be covered. The training addresses all competencies a field interviewer must possess.

The basic training for telephone interviewers (agents) is three days, and takes the form of oral instruction (classroom training). Attention is given in this course to general knowledge, with specific instructions for the survey that participants will conduct by telephone immediately after the course. The maximum group size is twelve. Alongside theory, the programme comprises practical exercises in telephone interviewing, role play, interview techniques, gaining cooperation, and Statistics Netherlands interviewing rules. Interviewers are able to practice interviewing and persuasion techniques in this way. The course duration has intentionally been kept short. The course is augmented with intensive coaching and on-the-job training. This form of instruction was chosen in view of the high turnover of agents, and secondly because of the fluctuating need for agents, which depends on the current assignments. This method allows Statistics Netherlands to rapidly deploy new temporary employees who are engaged for telephone surveys.

#### *4.5.2 Study-specific training*

Depending on the design and complexity of the survey, one of the following forms of instruction is chosen for study-specific training:

- written instruction (manual and an accompanying document);
- written instruction and discussion of the survey in progress meetings (led by the regional managers);
- oral and written instruction;
- refresher sessions for telephone interviewers who have previously performed a survey.

The group size for oral instructions is very variable. When opting for 'traditional' instruction (i.e. a combination of oral instructions and exercises), the average group size is 12-15. In what is known as 'station training' the group consists initially of approximately 30 interviewers. They form groups of 5 during the course, to work with a supervisor on intensive exercises. The instruction duration varies depending on the course from one half-day session to two full days. Depending on the characteristics and size of the corresponding survey, a method is sought for each course that will challenge the interviewers and generate sufficient interaction.

#### *4.5.3 Course redesign*

It was decided in the final quarter of 2009 to redesign the basic training completely. The reasons were:

1. changes in data collection methods, such as mixed mode and web-interviewing;
2. changes in the way interviewers are used, such as for home-based interviewing[3] and engaging field interviewers for telephone interviewing;

[3] Conducting telephone interviews from home.

3. the variable number of external and internal assignments;
4. trends in the field of instruction and training, blended learning and e-learning.

The associated plans are currently being worked out. The starting points are as follows.

- In future, interviewers at Statistics Netherlands will be trained as face-to-face interviewers, telephone interviewers or a combination of these two roles. All interviewers will then be given the same basic training, structured into: a general module, a CATI module and a CAPI module.
- The subjects and modules to be handled will correspond in some ways with the subjects in the former basic training, but upgraded to introduce new competencies.
- The structure of the new course will be based on self-activation, and will no longer be bound to a set time and venue, which is known as blended learning. The intention is to make the training form dependent on the training need. Much of the skills training will be face-to-face. E-learning will also be used, e.g. for information transfer.

The basic training will be followed up with a track based on an interviewer's personal file. The training will be customized for individual interviewers, in order to match interviewers' needs flexibly and to satisfy the requirements of the programme of activities for interviewer employability.

Prominence will be given to testing the skills and knowledge acquired: each module passed can be recorded in a personal portfolio. One of the new Statistics Netherlands interviewer requirements will be that a pass in the module concerned with a survey will be considered a basic qualification for employment.

## 5. Conclusion

This report discussed interviewer training and various relevant matters of concern. Recommendations were also made with respect to the structure of training courses. Training courses can take various forms. Nonetheless, a balance must always be found between costs and benefits. For instance, a course for interviewers who are engaged for only a short period will often have a different (less extensive) structure than one for interviewers in long-term employment.

E-learning has been on the rise in recent years. E-learning provides many new opportunities for interviewer training and cost reduction. As a consequence, interviewer training could take an entirely different shape in future. Statistics Netherlands is currently redesigning the basic training for interviewers, and e-learning will assume an important role.

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## Version history

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| 1.0 | 24-11-2009 | First Dutch version | Sabine Kockelkoren | Dirkjan Beukenhorst, Mariet Camp |
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