Training Interviewers in the Use of Blaise

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1. Introduction

Over the past 8 years OPCS has become experienced in instructing interviewers in the use of Blaise as an interviewing tool for both CAPI and CATI surveys. This paper concentrates on the CAPI training programme, in particular on the Initial Training Course for interviewers and on the role played by trainers in the field.

CAI is now the basic data collection tool for many organisations. This paper also looks at the new methodology from a trainer's viewpoint, and considers how CAI can best be implemented to facilitate the training of interviewers.

2. A brief history of CAPI training at OPCS

Following 4 trials between March 1987 and July 1990, CAI was introduced on our Labour Force Survey in September 1990. 154 interviewers already working on the PAPI survey were trained between July and September 1990. The training consisted of a 2 day office-based training course.

In September 1991 the Labour Force Survey quadrupled in size, and OPCS decided to recruit and train a separate field force. Interviewers attended a 6 day course covering survey methods and procedures as well as training in CAPI.

The field force used for all of our other surveys, the General Field Force (GFF), gradually saw more of its work being carried out using CAPI. Today over 90% of our total interviewing is CAPI. On joining OPCS all of the GFF interviewers had undergone a 3 day initial training course covering interviewing technique. As CAPI surveys appeared interviewers were trained both on CAPI and the specific survey. Typically these courses lasted 2 days.

Once all of the current GFF interviewers had been trained on CAPI it was then possible to revise the initial training course so that it also covered CAPI.

3. The Initial Training Course

The main part of the course consists of 4 days of training in our London office conducted by headquarters staff assisted by field trainers. Interviewers complete approximately 7 hours of home study before they come into the office.

About 3 hours is spent working through a training pack covering standard interviewing method, and up to 4 hours carrying out practice interviews using paper questionnaires. We do not send out computers in advance of the course. We found in the course of training interviewers for the Labour Force Survey that it was best not to. At that time over 50% of the interviewers had no previous experience of working with computers, and consequently needed a great deal of support from office staff. Today more interviewers have some experience of computers when they join us, and we are rethinking this policy.

At the moment the only information about CAPI that the interviewer receives before the course is a 3 page leaflet designed mainly to reassure them. The leaflet outlines in general terms how CAI works, highlighting its advantages. Interviewers are assured that they need not be computer-literate or have keyboard skills, and that practical sessions feature heavily in the training.

A maximum of 12 interviewers are invited to each course. This is felt to be a manageable number, particularly for the group sessions.

The timetable for the course is as follows:

Day 1	Duration (minutes)
Doorstep and full introductions	120
Interviewing method	60
Sampling	30
Practice introductions	90

Day 2	
Introduction to laptop	**150**
Dummy interviewing (whole group)	**60**
Coding industry and occupation	75
Practice interviewing (groups of 3/4)	**90**

Day 3

Classification	75
Administration, backing up, data transmission	**90**
Planning of work	30
Practice interviewing (groups of 3/4)	**180**

Day 4

Practice interviewing (groups of 3/4)	**120**
Performance management	45
Allocation of work, claims	90

Practical sessions involving use of a laptop computer have been highlighted. These account for 53% of the time spent in the office.

On the first day the sessions follow up on the study the interviewers have completed before attending the course, in particular the practice interviewing.

The first CAPI training session is on the second day. The highlighted sessions in days 2 to 4 are described below.

"Introduction to the laptop" - 150 minutes.

Laptops are distributed and the interviewers are instructed in the following:

a)   Basic laptop operation.

Using mains electricity or battery power, adjusting the screen brightness or contrast, the keyboard, what the function keys do, the floppy-disk drive.

b)   Case management.

Loading questionnaires onto the laptop, selecting cases to interview, entering/exiting cases.

c)   Basics of CAPI.

Entering different types of answer (single response, multiple-response, numeric, text), changing and correcting answers, soft/hard checks, making comments.

Although the procedures for operating the laptop on battery power are covered, the interviewers use mains electricity during the course. We have found this less disruptive during the course, and it is less common in the field for interviews to be carried out using battery power anyway.

New cases are opened for this first session, with the trainer telling the interviewers what they should enter at each stage. The trainer's laptop is connected to a panel-projector so that the interviewers can follow more easily.

The training questionnaire we use has been designed to cover the full range of question types, and a range of topics representative of most of our continuous surveys.

"Dummy interviewing" - 60 minutes.

The trainer takes the role of respondent, asking each course member in turn to take the role of interviewer. All course members key the respondent's answers. The trainer also keys the answers so that they can be refered to on the projection screen.

The purpose of this session is to consolidate the interviewers' understanding of both CAPI and standard interviewing method.

"Practice interviewing" - 390 minutes.

On days 2 to 4 interviewers are split into groups of 3 or 4 for practice interviewing sessions led by a field trainer. The sessions are similar to the "Dummy interviewing", but because of the smaller groups more individual attention can be given by the trainer.

More advanced CAPI techniques, dealing with complex warnings for example, are introduced gradually. As the sessions progress and interviewers become more comfortable with using the laptop, the emphasis shifts from CAPI to standard interviewing method.

"Administration, backing up, data transmission" - 90 minutes.

The whole group reconvenes for a session covering:

a)   Accounting for cases.

        Recording the outcome (interview, non-response or ineligible), calls made to the address, reasons for refusal or non-contact etc.

b)   Backing up work.

        Making a back up onto floppy disk.

c)   Data transmission.

        Preparing cases for transmission, using the modem.

Training cases (example cases which have been constructed to illustrate training points) are used to demonstrate the procedures for accounting for cases and for data transmission. As in previous sessions with the whole group interviewers use their laptops under instruction from the trainer. Once again the projection panel is used.

4. Training on individual surveys

Training requirements can vary considerably from survey to survey, but for most of our continuous surveys training courses are fairly similar.

Most of the training courses, or "briefings" for these surveys consist of 1 day in the office preceded by some advance study. Having attended the Initial Training Course interviewers are expected to be conversant with CAPI, but briefings do afford interviewers a further opportunity to improve their CAPI skills.

Typically, the pre-course material includes a "dummy" interview, or interviews, on audio tape. Interviewers listen to the tape, recording the respondent's answers onto a training case on their laptop. Training points are made on the tape, and it is common for warnings to be triggered and for answers to require amendment.

The day in the office often features a session similar to the "dummy interviewing" in the Initial Training Course. Part of the interview that is especially complex, or that is very specific to the survey, might be used for this purpose.

5. Training in the field

When an interviewer begins work on a survey for the first time they are accompanied by a field trainer. The trainer spends 2 days at the start of the interviewer assignment and 1 day towards its end with the interviewer.

If on the Initial Training Course the interviewer is found to be weak in some respect, this information is fed through to the field trainer. This means that if the interviewer is not sufficiently proficient in CAPI, for example, the trainer will be able to devote more time to this aspect of the training.

The trainer meets the interviewer either at the interviewer's home or in the work area. Before setting out to interview the trainer checks that the interviewer is properly prepared. As far as CAPI is concerned this means checking that the interviewer has the correct questionnaire on the laptop and 2 fully-charged batteries.

Clearly, at this stage it is very important that the interviewer feels confident about operating the laptop. If they are not, the trainer is able to offer them one-to-one tuition.

The trainer always conducts the first interview. The interviewer follows the interview by keying the respondent's answers into their own laptop. As well as the interviewer having a chance to observe a properly conducted interview, this allows them to practice keying answers in a real interview situation.

When it comes to the next interview, although the interviewer is conducting the interview the trainer also keys the respondent's answers. This can be very reassuring for the interviewer because should they encounter a problem with the laptop, all of the data has been safely stored on the trainer's laptop.

After the interview has been completed and they have left the respondent's house, the trainer will go through the completed interview with the interviewer, checking the accuracy of the interviewer's recording.

Over the last year we have acquired a new tool to assist the field trainers. We are using software that enables us to link the interviewer's and trainer's laptops. The interviewer's "host" laptop is connected by wire to the trainer's "remote" laptop. On the remote laptop screen it is possible to see exactly what is appearing on the host's screen, but only the host's keyboard is operable.

The main advantage is that the person using the remote laptop can see exactly what is being keyed on the host laptop. This can save the time usually spent in going through the interview together after leaving the repondent's house.

For the trainer, because they are not keying the answers into their laptop, it also allows them to pay more attention to the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent.

However, some interview situations can mean the system is not practical. There is a potential hazard in trailing the lead linking the laptops across the room in which the interview is taking place. The link can only be used safely when the laptops can be positioned fairly closely together, so we ask trainers to assess whether or not it is appropriate to use the link once they are in the respondent's house.

6. How CAI can aid the training process

My colleague, Paul Hunter, presented a paper at the last IBUC about "Introducing CAI standards within OPCS", in which he described the advantages of establishing standards. The introduction of consistent practices between surveys can only be beneficial to trainers.

Standardisation of screen layout between surveys is particularly helpful. It is also important that the computer offers as much help as possible to the interviewer. Screen messages should be informative, and appropriate help screens provided. Case management systems should be designed to be intuitive. The interviewer should be allowed to both control and see what is happening.

CAI should make it easier to maintain standards. Having standard Blaise code that can be copied from survey to survey should ensure that core classification questions, for example, are always asked in the same way.

There are areas still to be explored in offering assistance to interviewers through Blaise. One example would be storing instructions or definitions relating to specific questions within the questionnaire, so that they could be accessed by the interviewer during the interview.

I'm sure there are also possibilities for computer based training packages to be designed for interviewers learning the basics of CAPI. Distance learning can be very effective, and a properly produced computer package would make it possible for interviewers to start learning about CAPI at home.

7. Conclusion

Effective training programs are an essential part of the survey process. The move to CAI has meant new challenges for trainers, and it is essential that those designing training programs not only keep pace with the resultant changes in methodology, but also take full advantage of advances in technology.