

Experiences from the interviewer training and monitoring in the Swedish LFS

Background

Every month, approximately 250 interviewers are involved in collecting data for the Swedish LFS. All data is collected through computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI). In order to ensure data quality it is central to minimize interviewer bias. This can be done in mainly two ways, by ways of questionnaire construction, and by interview training.

Until 2014, Statistics Sweden was responsible for the entire data collection via its own data collection department. In 2015 decision was taken to outsource a parts of the data collection to an external supplier. This started with a smaller test with few respondents, but the share gradually increased up to 20 percent of the sample in 2017 and to 50 percent in 2018.

The external supplier is responsible for recruiting interviewers, but Statistics Sweden is still responsible for the subject-specific training. This meant that a large number of interviewers had to be trained by the LFS-Unit at Statistics Sweden on short notice. In this paper, we will briefly discuss our experiences of training a new interviewer organisation, challenges and work ahead.

Training programme

One of the main challenges for a new interviewer organisation is that knowledge dissemination is limited, since everyone who works in the organisation is new to the LFS, including the supervisors. Extra support and control on the part of the client (the LFS-Unit) is required instead, to ensure an adequate level of quality.

A lot of time and resources are put into interviewer training at the Swedish LFS. Each new interviewer is required to attend a two-step training programme before being allowed to work as an interviewer for the LFS. The first step is basic training in interviewing technique, arranged by the interviewer organisation. The second step is the LFS specific training, where all lectures are based on LFS examples, arranged by the LFS-Unit.

During 2017 and 2018, roughly 90 interviewers from the external data supplier were trained, over the course of 11 sessions, to collect data for the Swedish LFS. The LFS-specific interviewer training is a highly standardised programme tailored for a group of eight interviewers and consists of four parts:

- 1) self-studies preceding the course (20 hours);
- 2) lectures (5 hours) about the purpose of LFS, how the questionnaire is constructed, coding of occupation and NACE etc. ;
- 3) practical interview training with fictitious respondents; (11 hours); and
- 4) supervised interviews with real respondents. (6 hours)

The main emphasis of the programme is practical training, in which the interviewer, from the very start, learns to use interviewer software and carry out training interviews using realistic examples. During the programme, each interviewer also has to carry out at least four high-quality monitored interviews to pass the course and start interviewing for the LFS.

Two times per year, feedback sessions are arranged for all interviewers working for the external supplier (about 2 hours each). During these sessions, problems found during monitoring of interviews, or through comparisons of the data between the two data suppliers, are discussed with the interviewers. The interviewers are also informed about changes in the questionnaire and any other current issues.

Monitoring

An important tool for ensuring that the data collection lives up to the quality requirements, is continuous monitoring of the interviews.

Each month a random sample of about 5 percent of the interviews are recorded, which is accordance with the ISO requirements. A selection of these are later monitored by both the data supplier and staff at the LFS-unit. Both the interviewer and the respondent are

informed in the interview that the interview may be recorded, which may have an effect on the interviewer's behaviour.

The data supplier monitors the interviews for the main purpose of improve interviewer skills and to give direct feedback to the interviewer as a part of their development.

For the LFS-Unit, the main purpose of monitoring is to detect flaws in the questionnaire, such as questions that are frequently misinterpreted by the respondents, to find ways to improve the wording and thereby the quality of the answers. However, when major or frequent errors are detected, the LFS-Unit provides feedback directly to the data supplier. Another function of the monitoring is to give feedback regarding how well the interviewer training programme is working, and if more focus must be set on certain topics.

During the interview monitoring, any deviations are noted for each question block based on central guidelines and templates, including:

- whether the interviewer reads out all the required dates (concerning the reference period);
- other reading that deviates from the questionnaire;
- whether the interviewer explains or reformulates the question when this is needed to help comprehension;
- the interviewer follows up answers from the respondents as needed;
- whether the interviewer or respondent misunderstands the intent of the question; and
- whether the questions are asked in a leading way.

The recorded interviews have been especially important for providing a picture of the general quality of the data collection of the new supplier.

Observations made based on recorded interviews

The Swedish LFS relies heavily on dependent interviewing (for waves 2-8). The dependent interviews are generally shorter and easier for the interviewer than the first wave interviews, since the respondent only has to confirm whether the situation regarding most of the central variables is the same as in the previous interview. Dependent interviews with permanent employees make up a large proportion of the recorded interviews, which is natural as these constitute the largest part of the sample.

Some common issues detected in the recorded interviews:

- all dates are not read out;
- the interviewer rephrases or merges questions;
- the interviewer investigates too little, which means that it is unclear whether the answer is correct; and
- the interviewer asks the questions are asked in a leading way.

A general conclusion is also that dependent interviews (2-8:th wave) with permanent employees, which is the most common type of interview, are associated with fewer errors than other types of interviews, which often require more effort on the part of the interviewer. These interviews have fewer quality deficiencies, and these are of a less serious nature.

Live monitoring

In July and August 2018, we applied a different method for monitoring in an attempt to approach the problem of using a random sample for monitoring described above. Instead of listening to recorded interviews, we monitored interviews live as they were carried out. The purpose was to listen to a certain subset of respondents, persons aged 15–24, and also to listen to as many of the interviewers as possible, to gain a broad perspective of the quality. We listened to 55 interviews in total carried out by 27 interviewers, which is about 40 percent of the total number of interviewers who were working for the external data supplier during this period.

On the positive side, we found no case of errors regarding classification of ILO-status in the monitored interviews. It was however clear that these interviews generally were more challenging for the interviewer than the recorded interviews (from a random sample), which was expected. Young persons generally have a less stable position on the labor market and poorer understanding of the concepts of the LFS, which places higher demand on the pedagogical function of the interviewer. The interviewers are also given fewer occasions to practice these interviews, since the group makes up a small share of the total sample, and young persons are generally less prone to answer the survey than older persons are.

Some common issues in the live monitored interviews included:

- The interviewer did not ask enough follow-up/investigative questions to arrive at the correct answer.

- The interviewer had difficulties in explaining central concepts of the LFS when the respondents asked about them.
- Inexperience in finding the right answer in long scrolling lists, resulting in stress and sometimes selecting the wrong option (for instance regarding occupation).
- The interviewer had difficulties with questions about the field of study and level of education (ISCED).

Work ahead

Based on our observations from interviewer training and monitoring connected to the new data supplier, we are planning the following actions to improve interviewing skills, and thereby data quality:

- Further training of the interviewers, focused on asking investigative questions connected to the topics we have found to be most difficult during the interviews:
 - NACE
 - Occupation
 - Type of employment
 - Education
- Short training videos directed towards all interviewers (both interviewer organisations)
- Continuous efforts to monitor interviews with certain groups of respondents, such as temporary employees, youth, unemployed persons, first wave respondents, and so on for the purpose of monitoring the quality in more difficult cases, and smaller groups that are seldom selected to monitor using a random sample.