

2007 Federal CASIC Workshops

Session B-1--Recent Innovations and Lessons Learned at Participating Organizations

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This session has replaced the traditional Round Robin Organizational Reports. The original Federal CAPI Workshop(s) consisted exclusively of “round robin” reports from Federal organizations and Federal contractors planning to conduct, and later conducting, surveys utilizing computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). The U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and University of Michigan Survey Research Center were the first participants followed shortly thereafter by the National Center for Health Statistics and Statistics Canada.

In time the Federal CAPI Workshops were expanded to include additional sessions on such topics as the authoring of CAPI instruments and the management and transmission of cases to CAPI interviewers. In 1997 the Federal CAPI Workshops were further expanded to include all forms of computer-assisted survey information collection (CASIC) and renamed the Federal CASIC Workshops. While the length of the conference, and the number of additional topics grew, the Round Robin reports were continued as a method for participating organizations to summarize their CASIC innovations and accomplishments during the previous year.

This year, a dozen organizations participated in the session: The U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; the Michigan Survey Research Center; Statistics Canada, the Blaise Program of Statistics Netherlands; Westat, the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago; Macro International, Mathematica Policy Research, the Research Triangle Institute, Market Strategies, and the Computer Assisted Survey Methods Program of the University of California at Berkeley. Each gave a presentation of between 10 and 15 minutes.

The following is a summary which the author prepared on the spot as the presentations were made and somewhat edited later for this written form.

Over the years, we have watched a number of CASIC topics develop.

Initially our focus was on how to collect personal interview data with laptop computers. We were concerned principally with the weight, size, and speed of the computers, with the software systems used to present the questions and record the responses, and how we would recruit and train interviewers to conduct the surveys with computers. The laptop PC became the standard hardware and we learned that our existing interviewers could master them. Initially, interviewer training consisted largely of group, classroom training and practice sessions. New developments are emphasizing more and more interviewer home study, now involving interactive web programs. Web programs also are being employed for interviewer recruitment and selection, while training programs now extend beyond the interviewers to more general survey staff, while web collaboration tools support joint staff activities in design and analysis.

Historically, a second focus was on case management and communications, how to download information to the interviewer and upload responses back to headquarters, how to transfer cases between interviewers, and how to facilitate communications between interviewers and their field supervisors. The next step was combined CATI-CAPI case management, transferring cases between personal and telephone interviewing within a common data base, including case appointments and the scheduling of telephone calling times. Current practice in several organizations has now progressed to “virtual call centers,” where dispersed telephone interviewers, working from their own homes, have access to the same resources, and receive the same supervisory monitoring, previously possible only with centralized staff in a call center. The next step, already being explored in market research, is outsourcing of specialized forms of interviewing, such as interviews in Spanish called from Central America and some interviews in English called from India. The “global virtual call center” may not be too far in the future.

Advances also are still being made in call scheduling for telephone interviews. There have been two basic methods of placing telephone calls for survey interviewing. In preview calling, the interviewer looks over the records and interviewer notes of previous calls to a case before calling it, to be fully prepared when the telephone is answered. Much time is spent in this approach preparing for and recording unanswered calls, such as ring-no-answers, busy signals, and answering machines. In predictive dialing, the system dials many numbers at the same time, records the noncontact outcomes automatically, and routes the call to an interviewer only if the telephone is answered by a person. NORC has adopted an approach they call hybrid dialing. Initial calls to new numbers and repeated calls to nonanswering numbers are assigned to predictive dialing, but once a call is answered it is assigned to preview dialing thereafter.

Past FedCASIC conferences have focused on specialized forms of computer-assisted interviewing, including their use with Global Positioning Systems (GPS), Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing (A-CASI), and Computer-Assisted Recorded Interviews (CARI) used in monitoring of CAPI interviews and recording verbatim responses. Reports at this session show that these specialized technologies continue to grow in importance and capabilities.

The major trend in the last several years has been the growth of Web Surveys and the evolution of multi-mode surveys involving CATI, CAPI, and Web Survey versions of the same instrument. In the past, the Web response was often only an option for respondents who preferred it, but this year Mathematica reports that the Web has become the principal mode of its multi-mode surveys. That is surely a major turning point in the field. Major CAI software for CATI and CAPI, such as Blaise, has not been met with equal enthusiasm for web applications, which may be one reason we learned this year that Blaise is beginning a major redesign. The growing importance of web surveys, and the evolution of a variety of disparate systems to cope with the increasing variety of CAI data collection options may partly lay behind Statistics Canada’s plans to revisit, integrate, and standardize its CAI activities in a Master Control System.

Another major trend, especially evident this year, is the shrinkage of collection devices for CAPI. Increasing numbers of data collection programs are using very small collection devices, such as personal digital assistants (PDA’s) and other small hand-held computers. The Census Bureau is looking at such devices for the 2010 decennial census. One presenter noted that these devices were so small that they were almost unnoticeable by respondents when they were

approached by an interviewers. This may have a variety of consequences. In the early days of CAPI, interviewers felt that carrying a laptop added to their status and receptivity by respondents, even if it raised the threat of assault and theft in dangerous neighborhoods. An unnoticeable device no longer has those benefits and disadvantages. Keychain cameras, which we also heard about this year, again are so small as to be unnoticeable to average respondents. They may add to the list of minuscule tools for survey research.

The reports also mentioned two additional emerging or re-emerging collection modes. The first is the cell phone survey, a survey of respondents reached on their cell phones. The sample is, of course, unrepresentative of the general population at present, and there are a variety of special problems in their execution, but cell phone surveys will undoubtedly continue to grow in importance. The second is the revival of the E-mail survey by BLS for some specialized establishment surveys. Clearly, such surveys could be conducted in more attractive and sophisticated ways than in the past.

Several presenters emphasized a new (or renewed) trend of capturing data from paper for electronic storage and transmission. The new emphasis is for capture not in the survey office but in the field. Interviewer notes, respondent consent forms, printed or handwritten names and addresses, and similar field material can be scanned and stored in a CAPI computer for later transmission. One primary motivation for this is security. While confidential information stored in a computer can be encoded for security and the computer memory protected from unauthorized access in various ways, confidential material on paper cannot.

Another continuing CAI theme receiving renewed emphasis is EDI, or Electronic Data Interchange and the use of administrative records for statistical data. With survey response rates generally declining and survey budgets under increasing pressure, the use of existing records, especially of establishments, to replace or supplement survey data has become increasingly attractive.

Finally, we recognize that the problems of documenting CAI surveys for analysts and other users remains a key element of our agenda. If this topic received little mention in our Round Robin session, that is partly because a session on CAI documentation was being held concurrently.

To summarize this summary, this year we learned of outsourcing of Spanish interviewing to Costa Rica, interactive home training of interviewers via the web, possible global virtual call centers, hybrid dialing for telephone interviews, the emergence of web surveys as the principal mode of multi-mode surveys, a coming redesign of Blaise, field capture of data from paper for security reasons, the shrinkage of CAPI collection devices to the point of unnoticeability, keychain cameras, and the continued relevance of EDI and E-mail surveys. The Round Robin continued its function of keeping us current with a still evolving field.