

4. INTERVIEWER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Westat's telephone interviewer and supervisor training program maximizes trainee involvement, thereby providing the trainer with ample opportunity to observe and evaluate individual performance. Given that our interviewers come to us with different levels of skill and experience, our training program is designed to ensure that they all finish training with the same understanding of survey research in general, the specific project goals, the substantive content of the survey, and Westat's performance expectations. Project training for the 2001 National Survey of Veterans (NSV 2001) began on February 10, 2001 with an initial group of 31 interviewers. In the 5 months following the first training session, another 267 interviewers were trained in ten separate sessions, bringing the total number of interviewers trained for the NSV 2001 to 298. After production was underway, we also conducted additional training sessions on special topics, such as proxy interviewing, refusal conversion, tracing calls, and language problem cases. Interviewers selected to participate in these special sessions possessed skills relevant to the operation for which they were trained.

4.1 Recruitment

We screened prospective interviewers over the telephone, and invited those with clear, articulate voices for an in-person interview. During the hiring interview, we asked about related interviewing and telephone experience and had the potential hire conduct a mock telephone interview. We then invited individuals with relevant skills and experience into a training group. We also assigned veteran Westat interviewers to the project.

4.2 Initial Training

Interviewers were recruited and trained in six Westat Telephone Research Centers (TRC). The TRC operations manager conducted all training sessions, and the project's telephone center supervisors (team leaders) attended every session. To ensure that each training group received identical information, session content was scripted ahead of time and presented verbatim from the prepared text. During the training program, the trainer and team leaders observed interviewer performance on interactive exercises and role plays. At the end of each day of training, the trainer and team leaders shared their observations, evaluated interviewer progress,

and identified problems to address the next day. Individuals who consistently failed to meet performance expectations were released from the project.

Before the project-specific training, new interviewers attended General Interviewing Techniques training. This 8-hour training covered Westat's basic telephone interviewing conventions, including listening skills and probing techniques. We used interactive exercises to teach interviewers how to answer respondent questions, establish rapport, and gain their cooperation. Each new interviewer was also required to attend computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) training, a tutorial on how to operate a CATI terminal, and the data entry and response-recording conventions used in Westat's CATI system.

Interviewer training was divided into sessions devoted to specific topics. For example, Session 1 included an introduction to the study, a demonstration of an extended interview, a review of frequently asked questions and answers, and detailed instructions on contact procedures and administering the screener portion of the interview. Other topics included how and when to select a proxy for an extended interview, refusal avoidance, the use of study forms and materials, and the advance notice letters mailed to the veterans from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Westat. Trainers also explained the differences in the procedures used for the RDD and List Samples, such as the verification questions administered to confirm that the correct sampled veteran had been reached from the List Sample. Exhibit 41 shows the NSV 2001 training agenda.

To reinforce information presented in the first session, interviewers next participated in scripted role plays. The CATI screening instrument and extended questionnaire were displayed on each interviewer's CATI terminal, as well as on overhead screens for the group to view together. Following the sequence of the questionnaire, each interactive script reviewed section-specific concepts and definitions. The interviewers took turns asking the questions from their terminal screens and the trainer, acting as respondent, gave the scripted answers. The answers simulated specific situations and problems that interviewers would encounter in actual interviews, and provided practice with a variety of likely skip pattern scenarios. As another means of simulating live interviews, interviewers were paired with each other to practice additional scripted role plays. Finally, interviewers completed a written exercise designed to test their knowledge of the presented material.

Exhibit 4-1. NSV 2001 interviewer training agenda

SESSION 1

TIME	LENGTH	TOPIC
9:00-9:15 am	15 minutes	Introduction to the Study
9:15-9:45 am	30 minutes	Demonstration of Extended Interview
9:45-10:15 am	30 minutes	Review of Frequently Asked Questions and Answers
10:15-10:30 am	15 minutes	<i>Break</i>
10:30-10:55 am	25 minutes	Screener Interactive 1 with Question by Question Review
10:55-11:30 am	35 minutes	Screener Interactives 2, 3, and 4
11:30-1:00 pm	1 hr 30 minutes	Screener Contact Procedures

SESSION 2

2:00-2:30 pm	30 minutes	Screener Contact Exercise
2:30-4:00 pm	1 hr 30 minutes	Extended Interactive 1 with Question by Question Review
4:00-4:15 pm	15 minutes	<i>Break</i>
4:15-4:45 pm	30 minutes	Identifying Proxies
4:30-5:00 pm	30 minutes	Extended Contact Procedures
5:00-5:30 pm	30 minutes	Key Concepts Review (Glossary)

SESSION 3

9:00-10:00 am	60 minutes	Contact Role Plays
10:00-11:15 am	1 hr 15 minutes	Extended Interactive 2 with Question by Question Review
11:15-11:30 am	15 minutes	<i>Break</i>
11:30-11:45 am	15 minutes	Discussion of RDD Sample and List Sample
11:45-12:00 am	15 minutes	Use of Comments
12:00-12:30 pm	30 minutes	Verifying List Sample Veterans
12:30-12:45 pm	15 minutes	Review of Forms (Problem Sheet, Mailout, Q & A's, Coding Special Contacts)
12:45-1:00 pm	15 minutes	Interviewer Questions

SESSION 4

2:00-3:00 pm	60 minutes	Refusal Avoidance Exercise
3:00-4:00 pm	60 minutes	Role Plays
4:00-4:15 pm	15 minutes	<i>Break</i>
4:15-6:00	1 hr 45 minutes	Role Plays (cont.)

We provided all interviewers with two reference documents, which were used both in training and during data collection. The *NSV Interviewer Training Manual* contained background on the study as well as the specific procedures to be used while on the telephone. The manual included sections on contacting respondents, answering respondent questions, recording the results of different contact situations, and handling contact problems. The *NSV Question-by-Question Specifications* contained detailed examples, explanations, and definitions for each survey question in the extended portion of the questionnaire. Both training documents are provided as separate volumes.

Language Problem Training

Bilingual Spanish-speaking interviewers were first tested for fluency. Those we determined sufficiently fluent were trained to call households previously identified as Spanish-speaking and determine whether an English-speaking person lived there.

Proxy Interview Training

In a number of cases, we determined that veterans could not answer the questions for themselves. If, for example, the sampled veteran had difficulty hearing or speaking, or was ill or incapacitated, interviewers were instructed to code the case “Proxy Needed” and obtain the name and telephone number of the person most knowledgeable about that veteran’s health and medical situation. Cases coded this way were automatically put into a special CATI work class, ensuring that only interviewers trained to conduct proxy interviews were assigned to them. Over the course of data collection, 23 highly-skilled interviewers were selected from the NSV 2001 staff and trained to conduct proxy interviews. With slight modifications, the same CATI questionnaire used to interview the veterans themselves was also used for the proxy respondents. Therefore, we carefully instructed proxy interviewers to re-phrase each question so that it was clear to proxies that they were being asked about the veteran, not themselves. The proxy interview training took about 1 hour.

Tracing Training

We conducted a 1-hour tracing training at the Rockville telephone center with six interviewers possessing previous tracing experience and excellent probing skills. Training included instruction on the tracing sheet that listed all previous contact information collected for the veteran, the use of directory assistance to locate a good telephone number, and the procedures for documenting all call attempts and their results. Additionally, trainers reviewed the procedures for following up on a potential lead and verifying that a telephone number, when not listed under the List Sample veteran's name, was nevertheless one at which we could reach that veteran.

Refusal Conversion Training

For refusal conversion training, we selected experienced interviewers who had above average cooperation rates. In this 2-hour session, interviewers discussed the kinds of refusals they had already encountered and shared ideas for addressing respondent objections. To sharpen interviewer presentation and timing of responses to refusals, session participants conducted role play exercises. Other participants observed the role playing pair and provided feedback and additional ideas for responding to refusals. Interviewers made notes of their favorite ideas for converting refusing respondents and incorporated them into their own repertoire.