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Implementing a Case Ownership Model with Telephone Interviewers

Jamie Wescott • RTI International, Research Triangle Park, NC

Introduction

In telephone studies, automated call scheduling systems help to modulate interviewer effects and reduce nonresponse by using algorithms to ensure that calls are made at optimal times. When an automated call scheduler is not available, a case-ownership model is an alternative approach for case management. In a case-ownership model, telephone interviewers are each assigned a set of individual cases and use their judgment to determine how best to work the case, similar to how field interviewers work their caseloads. This paper describes our experiences implementing a case ownership approach to telephone contacting on a national study of young adults.

Background

For the present study, we obtained consent to collect high school transcripts for approximately 2,200 sample members as part of a national longitudinal study of young adults. The consent collection included hard-copied mailings, e-mails, and telephone calls to sample members and their parents or guardians.

A total of 1,646 sample members were eligible to receive outbound calling; 1,093 cases had one or more contacts, and 404 cases had no contacts. Of the 1,093 cases with contacts, 894 were assigned to interviewers and 199 cases were assigned to supervisors. Interviewers were assigned cases in a first-come, first-served manner, and supervisors were assigned cases if interviewers did not accept their assignments.

Benefits of the case ownership model

Case management system is less costly and time consuming to develop than an automated call scheduler.

Drawbacks to the approach

There is less consistency and standardization of approach than would occur in a study with automated call scheduling.

Additional case review is required to ensure that data collection methodologies are followed consistently.

Implementation

Role of the Interviewer

Review their assigned cases

Determine which of their assigned cases to call when, which telephone numbers to attempt, and how often to schedule callbacks

Gain cooperation from sample members or sample members’ parents or guardians

Administer a web-based consent form over the phone

Case Management System (CMS)

We based our CMS on a security-institutional data collections, which use a case ownership model.

The system used a shared assignment approach; cases were assigned to interviewers who worked complementary shifts throughout the week.

The CMS included a report that was tailored for each interviewer, which included

A list of all cases assigned to the interviewer

The date, time, and results of the most recent call attempt

The next appointment for the case

The overall status of the case

The CMS also included

A list of all known contacts associated with each case (e.g., parents) and their contact information

An appointment feature for scheduling callbacks for specific dates and times

A contact history page that included a record of every contact attempt associated with the sample member

Suggested call scripts

Answers to frequently asked questions about the study

A link to complete the web-based consent form

Interviewer Training

None of the interviewers had worked on a study that used the case-ownership model; therefore, training emphasized case management skills:

Information about the background of the study

Strategies for gaining cooperation

Answers to frequently asked questions

How to launch and complete the web-based consent form

Talking points and sample call scripts that covered several call scenarios, and

Hands-on sessions in which interviewers acted out scenarios and practiced gaining cooperation without reading from a script.

Results

Of the approximately 2,200 total cases included in the consent collection effort, 500 (21.6 percent) provided consent. Of these, 22 percent responded by returning the consent form by mail, 54 percent provided consent over the phone, and 23 percent completed the self-administered web consent form.

Operational Observations

Interviewers’ responses were positive. They appreciated being able to work cases as they saw fit and enjoyed the challenge of case management.

Interviewers were effective at establishing rapport with sample members.

Case review was conducted to verify that cases were resolving consistently and that interviewers were following the study’s guidelines.

Deliberate effort was required to check scheduled appointments at the beginning of each shift.

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Conclusion

1. We observed moderate inconsistency of call contact distribution, interviewer productivity, and variation in the timing of call attempts. These differences occurred despite efforts to train interviewers, review cases, and randomly assign interviewers to cases.

2. While analysis of call data revealed inefficiencies in interviewer case-management skills, on balance, the design was effective for the collection. The cost savings from using this approach allowed for a robust tracing, locating, and calling effort, which ultimately may have had more positive impact on the response rate than automated call scheduling.

3. The case ownership approach can be implemented successfully with rigorous analysis of paradata throughout data collection and with interventions to ensure that cases are worked consistently. For larger studies, the labor costs associated with this review and manual intervention would likely outweigh system development savings.

4. This was a retrospective observational study; therefore, limited conclusions can be drawn regarding interviewers’ impact on nonresponse error. Future studies could use an experimental design to assess the extent to which interviewer variability in call timing and number of attempts affects the representativeness of the responding sample.

References


More Information

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