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# AN ACTIVE MANAGEMENT APPROACH TO SURVEY COLLECTION

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## ABSTRACT

Active management involves planning an approach to maximize “success” of the collection process. This includes establishing how progress will be monitored, contingency plans and communication plans. One objective of active management is to identify collection problems as quickly as possible and implement an appropriate action plan to deal with the situation. Another objective is to ensure that the budget allocated to collection is used effectively, especially in the final stages when dealing with cases that have not been contacted or completed.

An example is given using results from the recent Follow-up of Graduates (FOG) survey. This example illustrates the use of pre-defined strata to monitor response rates for key sub-populations and the corresponding setup and planning that was required in order to allow changes to priority settings for different strata during the collection cycle.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Active management refers to the plans and tools needed to manage collection while it is in progress. This includes monitoring progress (response rates, costs, data quality), identifying problems, implementing corrective actions, and evaluating success. The two main objectives of active management are: (1) to identify problems as early as possible, and correct them before collection has finished; and (2) to use collection resources effectively, in a way that optimizes data quality (not just response rates).

## 2. OVERVIEW

The purpose of the active management initiative is to provide timely, topical and relevant data on survey performance, so that problems with collection are identified early, and decisions about how to correct problems are based on cost, effort, and data quality in addition to response rates. Active management therefore includes:

1. monitoring survey progress against expectations;
2. identifying collection problems as early as possible;
3. finding explanations for why problems are occurring;
4. taking appropriate actions to correct problems; and
5. supporting a cooperative team approach.

Active management is a collective responsibility. Regional and head office survey collection managers, as well as survey program managers, all have roles to play and all need to be implicated in identifying problems and finding solutions.

First and foremost, active management requires some planning at the time of application design and development. If certain types of problems are anticipated, the possible actions to be taken should be discussed with the full project team (subject matter, methodology, SOD, ORDD, etc.) in order to ensure that the survey application and/or scheduler is set up to handle these actions.

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However, active management must also provide mechanisms for handling unanticipated problems. This must include the ability to generate ad hoc reports to investigate situations as they develop.

The underlying component to successful active management will be establishing an effective communication process. Problems, solutions, and decisions must be discussed with all stakeholders so that all implicated areas are aware of the actions being taken.

Finally, in order to establish best practices and share experiences so other surveys can avoid repeating a problem, an evaluation of the collection process should be done. This evaluation should document the types of problems that were identified, the decisions that were taken to correct the problems, and the impact of these actions on the final collection success indicators (response rates, etc.).

### **3. PLANNING**

A key component of active management is for survey teams to develop an “action plan” for their survey, prior to the development of the collection application. The action plan should take into account the progress indicators that are appropriate for that survey, the types of actions they would want to take if targets are not being met, and how they would want to deal with the hard-to-reach cases in the final days or weeks of collection. Since the action plan may require functionality to be built into the collection application and/or the call scheduler, it is important to have clear specifications as early as possible in the development stage.

A collection management plan should include:

- which indicators are most important for the survey (in terms of considering the survey to be a “success”)
  - for short collection periods, response rates might be the key indicator to monitor
  - for longer collection periods, other indicators might be more important (for example, costs relative to budget, c.v. of key estimates, etc.)
- at what level should these key indicators be monitored
  - depending on the survey, monitoring may be done by RO and/or province, or might be at a more detailed level such as stratum (e.g. geography, type of respondent)
- what type(s) of action(s) could be taken in the event that a key indicator is falling below expectations
  - actions might include giving priority to cases that fall into a particular stratum (as identified on the sample file), or cases that have a particular characteristic (as identified from analysis of in-progress cases during the collection period, i.e. on-the-fly)
- how will impacts of any actions be measured
- based on the identified key indicators, level of monitoring, and types of actions and their impacts, what information needs to be present on the sample file, what information needs to be available from the application (e.g. written to the BTH or other file), what functionality needs to be built into the application and/or the scheduler
- what reports are needed
- how will communication happen
- who needs to be involved in possible discussions

### **4. COMMUNICATIONS**

A communications strategy that covers the collection phase of a survey can ensure that the right people are informed about any decisions or discussions that impact their work. Survey teams that have used regular conference calls involving all stakeholders have found that this is much more effective than a sequential approach, both in terms of speed and clarity; in addition, more information and ideas come out in a collective discussion.

The communications strategy should clearly identify who needs to be contacted in the event of a problem, who has the authority to make decisions, and what the process should be for taking corrective actions. The strategy should also identify who is primarily responsible for monitoring different aspects of the collection process.

## **5. REPORTS**

Monitoring survey progress is typically done through reports. In order to work efficiently and not over-burden collection managers with too much information, it has been suggested that three levels of reports be considered: standard reports (common to all surveys) to monitor an agreed-upon set of indicators; pre-defined special reports to monitor an agreed-upon set of indicators for specific problems, to be used on an as-needed basis; and ad hoc reports to be defined and produced when situations arise that are not covered by the special reports.

The reporting plan for a survey should identify any variables that are required for reporting levels (e.g. geography, respondent type, other stratification variables) and ensure that this information is available on the sample file and on the BTH file. The plan should also identify which indicators are most important for monitoring progress and consequently which special reports might be required. To be most effective, the reporting plan should indicate which benchmarks can be supplied so that progress can be measured against these benchmarks. Business rules could also be incorporated to indicate how much deviation from the benchmarks is “problematic”.

Standard reports will be reviewed by a working group reporting to the Social Surveys CAI Standards Committee, which will include representation from the Active Management group. Among other things, this group will look at how benchmarks (and business rules) can be incorporated into the reports.

## **6. PROBLEM-SOLVING**

When problems arise in the field, the active management approach is expected to identify these problems early, inform the right people, and begin discussions on how to resolve the problems. The existence of a problem is typically identified through the use of standard reports to monitor progress. Once a problem has been identified, more details on the cause of the problem can be found through the use of special reports and/or ad hoc reports (as identified in the Reports section above).

The project team should define a strategy for how problem-solving will happen. This should include defining who needs to be informed, who will be involved in investigating the problem, how communication will happen, etc. The objective at this stage is to identify the nature and/or cause of the problem.

## **7. CORRECTIVE ACTIONS**

Once the cause of the problem has been identified, a decision must be taken as to what kind of corrective action should be put in place. The project team should define a strategy for how this decision-making and implementation will happen. This should include defining who needs to be involved in discussing possible solutions, who is ultimately responsible for taking the decision, how communications about that decision will happen, how the action will be implemented, etc. The objective at this stage is to decide on an action to correct the problem and implement that action.

Since the ability to take corrective action may depend on the design of the application, it is important to include some contingency planning in the overall collection management plan. If this is done, it will be easier to implement corrective actions. However, if there is no contingency plan, or the problem is outside the scope of the existing contingency planning, then corrective actions may require manual interventions. The strategy for implementing corrective actions in this situation should clearly identify any different procedures that may be required.

## **8. EVALUATION**

After taking corrective action, the survey team will need to monitor progress to determine if the action has had the expected impact. The team should define how they will evaluate whether the corrective action was successful. If additional reports, or modifications to existing reports, are required then this must be communicated to the necessary people. Changes to reports might include supplying new benchmarks, changing the stratification levels, etc. These possibilities should be included in the initial planning since there might be impacts on the survey setup or design.

## **9. AN EXAMPLE**

Recently, the Follow-up of Graduates (FOG) survey demonstrated the value of an active management approach to collection. The project team worked with ORDD to develop a protocol for scheduling cases and monitoring progress using stratum-level information. The strata were based on a combination of geography and level of education. This approach was aimed primarily at ensuring that they had sufficient response from key strata, particularly PhD students, which had been problematic in previous collection cycles. With this implementation, the survey was able to monitor response rates at the stratum level, and was able to assign higher priority to key strata that were falling behind at various points in the collection period. The survey was also able to shut down collection for strata that had reached their target, so that resources could be focussed on remaining strata.

## **10. METHODOLOGY**

To be successful, the active management initiative needs input from methodology. Adjusting the priorities of cases must be done in such a way as to not introduce bias into the estimates. Similarly, there is a great deal of research to be done to determine effective calling strategies (when should the first call be made for different types of cases, when should be second call be made given the outcome of the first call, etc.), the value of historical data and interviewer observations in predicting contact and response, and determining the parameters associated with setting and changing priorities.