

ESS fieldwork in Slovenia: nine rounds of building a successful interviewer network

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BRODER, Živa – FALLE ZORMAN, Rebeka. ESS fieldwork in Slovenia: nine rounds of building a successful interviewer network. In *Človek a spoločnosť [Individual and Society]*, 2019, roč. 22, č. 4, s. 63-66. doi: <http://doi.org/10.31577/cas.2019.04.563>

Abstract:

Slovenia has been a member of the European Social Survey (ESS) from the first wave (2002). All nine waves so far were conducted by the same survey organisation (Public opinion research centre at University of Ljubljana). This stability may be a key in explaining the success in building a reliable interviewer network. Since the first few waves we have almost completely changed the interviewers' management and switched from students to professional interviewers. The difference is clear; mostly reflected in higher response rates and in the quality of obtained data. An 'ideal' interviewer in Slovenia is a woman (although we do have some very good male colleagues), middle aged, with family and other working obligations. Students in recent years, unfortunately, proved to be unreliable in terms of seeing interviewing as "easy money", while the professionals are well aware that their livelihood depends on the quality of their work.

Key words: Slovenia. Social survey. Fieldwork. Interviewer network. Response rate. Quality data.

Interviewers: characteristics and selection

When choosing interviewers for the ESS our survey organisation gives priority to our permanent verified collaborators. Due to specific ESS requirements we needed to expand our regular interviewers' network, so we recruited some new interviewers. We had a personal informal meeting with all new interviewers who were going to work for us for the first time, a few months before the final briefing. Since we were looking for people with experience our new interviewers were mainly acquired through the help of some other research institutions or agencies (such as National Statistics or marketing agencies). 55 interviewers were involved in ESS 2018, 17 were new, but all of them had some previous experience.

Our four top interviewers received a higher workload as they proved with their work in the past that they are crucial for gaining a quality response in more demanding areas. The minimum number of acquired units (seven people in one PSU) was one and the maximum

number was 12. The average number of received PSU per interviewer was five. We do not hire new interviewers during the fieldwork (unless absolutely necessary), but allocate the possible additional workload to the active interviewers in the field.

Most of the interviewers in ESS 2018 were women, the ratio was 20 % male - 80 % female. Nine interviewers were under the age of 30 (17 %), five were older than 61 (9 %). We had 20 interviewers between 31 and 45 years old (36 %) and 21 were from 46 to 60 (38%). Only two interviewers have completed a vocational school, while 54 % of them have higher education.

Experience, as mentioned before, is crucial for persuading respondents to participate. Almost two thirds of our interviewers (64 %) had 5, or more, years of experience, while only 19% had less than 2 years of face-to-face interviewing. 21 % of interviewers were working with us for the first time and 62 % had already participated in several surveys with our survey organisation.

More than half (54 %) of our interviewers had experience with similar surveys over the past three years, where they had participated in five or more similar surveys, a further 31 % had participated in at least one similar study. Most interviewers (59 %) did not combine ESS work with other similar surveys, while many interviewers combined interviewing with their regular work (27 %) and other part- time jobs (31 %).

The success of every interviewer primarily depends on the ability of his or her ability to persuade the respondent to participate, and secondly on the environment where this particular interviewer operates (urban or rural). Those interviewers who achieve higher response rates are assigned multiple PSUs for being the most efficient ones.

Fieldwork

An individual sample from the Central Slovenian Register with a respondent's full name, address and year of birth is a great advantage. We send letters in advance to respondents in accordance with our interviewers' work plans and progress in the field.

During the fieldwork, interviewers are regularly (at least once a week) informed about their progress. We encourage and motivate them, if necessary helping them with advice and trying to find the best solutions for any problems which may occur during the fieldwork. We are available for their inquiries practically every day of the week via telephone or e-mail. When monitoring their work, we try to give them positive feedback, including from the respondents (if we get one), and we regularly communicate to them their value to our institution. We also encourage interviewers to solve all problems on a regular basis, even if that means taking away some of their workload. Fortunately, in recent years, this has happened very seldom, which is good reason to continue with this established practice.

We engage our best interviewers in each region for reissues and conversions at the end of the fieldwork, i.e. those who have high response rates and have extensive experience with unreachable respondents or (light) rejections. We also assist them with reminder / motivation letters to respondents, where their name and phone number is written, so the respondents can contact them directly.

At the end of the fieldwork we thank all interviewers for their cooperation and invite them to join us in our future projects. We send them Christmas cards every year and at the end of each survey we invite them to an informal debriefing, where they can share experience from the

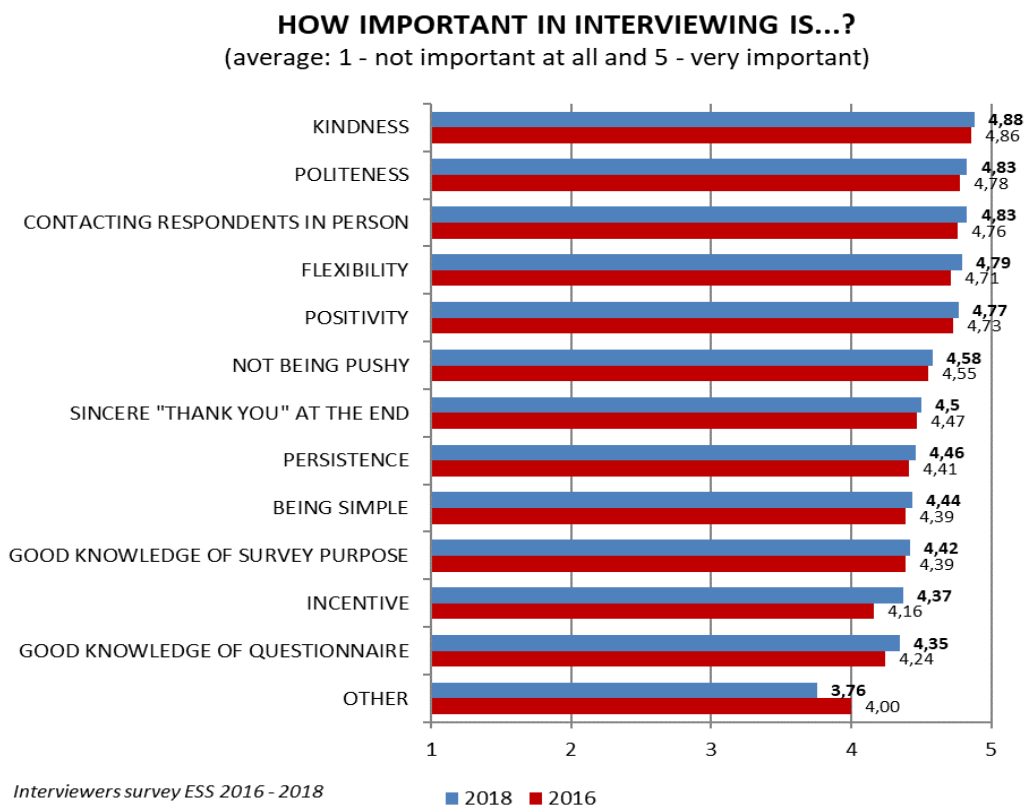
field and enjoy drinks and snacks. We also recommend our interviewers to other organisations and agencies or write letters of recommendation.

Interviewers' survey

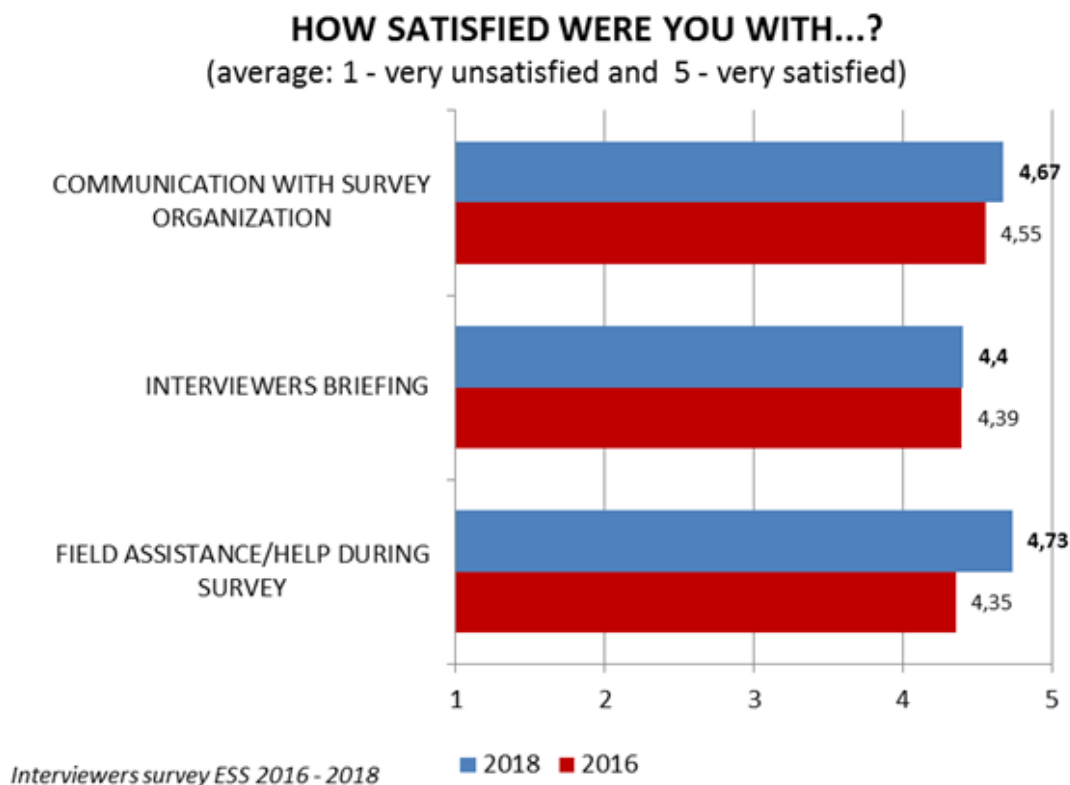
To obtain feedback on the perceptions of our survey practices and the interviewing process, we invited all our interviewers to do an on-line survey at the end of the last two ESS waves. The survey provides helpful insights into the situation in the field and enables us to learn what actually works and what does not work in real survey situations. Such first-hand information is of outstanding value and helps us to prepare the next interviewer briefings and provide interviewers with some hints and tips on how to optimize their fieldwork.

We are also eager to obtain constructive criticism and new ideas to improve our work. The questionnaire therefore includes satisfaction with interviewers' briefing, communication with our research team and assistance provided during the fieldwork. We are also interested in which tactics of persuasion are most successful with the respondents. For ESS 2018 for example, we added a question about the influence of the monetary gift card on the willingness to participate in the survey, and the vast majority of interviewers believe that the card at least in some (56 %), if not in the majority (35 %), affects the respondent's responsiveness. On the other hand, it seems rather surprising that incentives are still rated very low, although they were described as a very welcome change by both interviewers and participants.

The most important approaches stressed by interviewers are: kindness, politeness, personal contact with respondents, flexibility and positivity. They also believe that the key elements in convincing the respondent to participate are: not being pushy, but persistent, and offering sincere words of appreciation.



Graph 1: How important in interviewing is... ?



Graph 2: How satisfied were you with ... ?

Graph 2 shows that the high level of satisfaction with the work of the research team further increased in 2018, reasserting the strength of our fieldwork practices outlined in this paper. While the briefing rates remain at the same level, the rates of satisfaction with assistance and communication with the survey organisation has increased significantly. Satisfied interviewers, clearly, lead to good fieldwork results.

Conclusions

Researchers, who have been dealing with the implementation of the various surveys over a long period of time, are more and more aware of the importance of the interviewers' role. Notwithstanding the importance of the research, the strict methodological rules, the high quality sample, good incentives, carefully drawn up and standardized sent-in-advance letters, extensive briefings, and continuous research team assistance, ultimately, the interviewer is the one who will eventually go to the field, make personal contact with respondents and convince (or not) respondents to participate in the survey. Maintaining a trustworthy team of interviewers is the key to achieving satisfactory response rates and obtaining high quality data.