

# The post-pandemic role of face-to-face fieldworkers

**First Report**

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# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Background

Survey data collection involving face-to-face interviewing, also referred to as in-person interviewing, has a long history dating back to the late 1800s (O'Muircheartaigh, 1997). This method has been favoured by random probability surveys that require high levels of coverage of the target population, high response rates and high data quality (Groves et al, 2009), and by non-random probability surveys that seek qualitative judgements on products, services, media messaging and customer experience. More recently, the conduct of face-to-face surveys, particularly random probability surveys, has become more challenging. For example, the UK Market Research Society (MRS) in partnership with four UK survey organisations (GFK, Ipsos, Kantar and the National Centre for Social Research - NatCen) noted 'delivery challenges primarily driven by falling [survey] participation rates and a shortage of skilled interviewers' (May, Ainsby, McLaughlin, 2017; p1). The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)- funded Survey Data Collection Network (SDC-net) noted that these delivery challenges were felt to have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It recommended further research to explore how the role of face-to-face survey interviewers is changing (Maslovskaya et al, 2022). The research reported here is a response to that call.

## 1.2 Research aims and objectives

This research was funded by the ESRC, as part of the [Survey Futures](#) initiative. Survey Futures aims to deliver a step-change in survey research, to ensure it remains possible to carry out high quality social surveys in the UK. An objective of the initiative is to provide an understanding of the skills and capacity needs of the sector. This research speaks to that objective and research aims to address three challenges identified by the SDC-net meeting on the changing role of face-to-face social survey interviewers in the UK:

- Improve understanding of the ways in which the role of the face-to-face fieldworker is changing in response to societal, commercial, technological, and methodological trends.
- Identify the key skills and attributes needed by the face-to-face fieldworker today and how this is likely to change in the future.
- Identify the implications for sourcing and retaining skilled face-to-face fieldworkers.

This research is led by NatCen working in collaboration with Mervelles Limited, a HR consultancy. This first report presents work to-date and possible next steps. The rest of this chapter describes the research methodology. Chapter 2 considers the role of the face-to-face survey interviewer before the Covid-19 pandemic, describing recruitment challenges and defining the role. Chapter 3 discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on in-person surveys, challenges in recruiting and retaining survey fieldworkers, and the recruitment strategies being trialled. Chapter 4 looks at how the survey fieldworker role is changing and the implications of this role change for recruitment and retention for interviewers. Chapter 5 concludes by considering the potential implications of the changing nature of the survey interviewer role for organisations and the sector, proposing some potential ways forward.

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### 1.3 Research Methodology

The research presented in this report is based on semi-structured interviews with people with overall responsibility for face-to-face survey interviewers, who were identified through NatCen's existing contacts and networks, and the Register of MRS Field Companies. Named individuals were initially contacted by NatCen and invited to take part. The contact details of those who agreed were passed to Mervelles, who contacted them to arrange a convenient time for a one-to-one interview via videoconference. The initial invitation also mentioned that participants would be invited to a roundtable discussion of the research findings, that participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw their consent at any time. The research design was peer reviewed by NatCen's Research Ethics Committee prior to fieldwork starting.

The interview involved the discussion of the role of the face-to-face survey interviewer before the COVID-19 pandemic, significant changes since the pandemic, whether these changes will be sustained, and anticipated changes to the role. Views were also sought on the future role of face-to-face interviewers and on perceived implications for sourcing, employing, developing and reward. This interview guide (copy in Appendix A) was developed by Mervelles Limited, working in conjunction with input and guidance from NatCen. Interviews with 11 field managers from 11 social and market research organisations with a face-to-face interviewer panel, were undertaken between September and November 2023. These individuals were subsequently invited to an online round table event, at which Mervelles shared findings generated from the interviews as a means of checking the accuracy of the findings and that they resonated with their experiences. This approach is known as member checking (Birt et al, 2016). The roundtable also sought participants views on proposed responses to the challenges identified. The round table took place in January 2024.

Participating organisations agreed to be named in this report and were:

BEAM Fieldwork  
Beaufort Research  
BMG Research  
DJS Research  
Ipsos  
Kantar Public  
National Centre for Social Research  
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency  
Office for National Statistics  
Qa Research  
Walnut Unlimited

Our thanks to all those who took part in this research.

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# 2. The role of the survey field interviewer pre-pandemic

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## 2.1 Surveys and field interviewers pre-pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mixed mode survey designs had been steadily growing in popularity when in-person interaction was not deemed essential. Where in-person (place-based) interaction was essential – for example, visitor and tourist experience surveys, product testing, hall tests, exit interviews etc. – face to face fieldwork had remained relatively unchanged for some time.

The role of the fieldworker tended to be solely focused on face-to-face interviewing. There were few examples of workers performing tasks outside of this, and separate teams existed for other methods e.g., telephone-based research. There had been observed, however, a growing increase in survey complexity (e.g., measurements, strict protocols, and criteria etc.) and the use of digital technology (e.g., laptops, tablets for data recording etc.).

The profile of survey interviewers has traditionally been older, and female. The workforce was characterised by a significant cohort of long-standing, experienced interviewers. They tended to be retired individuals or ‘pre-retirement’. They were perceived to be motivated by a desire to engage in interesting work, maintain connections with the world of work as much as by earning additional income. Outside of this core, interviewer turnover has historically been quite high in the UK.

Overwhelmingly the traditional model of interviewer employment in the UK has been on a casual worker basis, with no guarantee of hours required of workers. For some employers there was a requirement for the worker to be available two or three days a week. Two models of remuneration predominated:

- (a) day rate with premia for bank holiday or weekend working; or
  - (b) piecework (pay for performance) where field interviewers were paid a unit rate for completed interviews.
- One organisation operated an annual-hours approach.

In the pay for performance model, the unit rate was typically based on estimates of the time required for an interview, travel and response rate. However, there were variations to this model, for example: basing the rate for a shift on past individual performance relative to set targets; or in one case, paying for a range of survey response outcomes not just survey completion (i.e., non-response; refusal; partial completion etc.).

Pay for the field interviewer tends towards the National Living Wage (NLW) - which is the legal minimum wage, reflecting the relatively low barriers to entry for the work. Consequently, prior and through the pandemic, employer costs have been increasing more rapidly for field interviewers due to this accelerated growth in the National Living Wage relative to average earnings. The NLW main rate grew by 65% 2013-2023 (Source: [www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/national-minimum-wage-previous-rates](http://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/national-minimum-wage-previous-rates)), twice as much as the 32% growth in

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median earnings for full time employees in the UK (Source: data from ASHE, ONS quoted in <https://www.statista.com/statistics/933075/wage-growth-in-the-uk>). Several organisations reported using a relevant real living wage metric for pay determination for the role.

## 2.2 The Field Interviewer Role Pre-Pandemic

This section summarises the purpose of the role, main accountabilities, and the competencies and attributes required for a pre-pandemic survey field interviewer.

### *Purpose of the Field interviewer role*

Engage with people to a) establish/confirm their eligibility to take part in the survey, gain their cooperation, and to collect data using standardised survey protocols data collection instruments.

### *Key Accountabilities*

The performance requirements for the role of face-to-face survey interviewer pre-pandemic can be summarised as follows.

- Understand survey goals, purpose and eligibility criteria required for subject selection and any other conditions through project packs, briefings and meetings as required.
- Organise own work schedule to complete interviews during the defined fieldwork period.
- Identify and engage positively with the subject to persuade them to take part, selling the benefits of participation e.g., personal or societal.
- Complete the survey, closely following the script as required, ensuring all interactions are in line with the survey and, where required, MRS protocols. Ensure responses are recorded accurately in the required format. Complete data acquisition needed for post-survey quality assurance checks.
- Ensure technology (laptop, tablet etc.) for recording data is regularly synced/uploaded to ensure data transfer in line with project requirements.
- Ensure regular update reports are made to project team and/or supervisor as required and that other administrative tasks are completed as required, in a timely manner.

### *Competencies and attributes*

The skills (things the role holder needs to be able to do), knowledge (things the role holder needs to know) and behaviours (how the role holder performs the work) that are required to perform the role of field survey interviewer as expected, are listed below.

#### Skills

- Interviewing.
- Basic IT skills, to operate the digital technologies – hardware and software – required for the role.
- Driving licence desirable, often essential.

#### Knowledge

- Of survey protocols, MRS guidelines.
- Basic knowledge of survey methods and data collection approaches.

#### Behaviours

- Communication
  - Engages positively, confidently, and warmly with people from diverse backgrounds; conveys information to others in a clear and concise way; ensures consistency in how questions are framed and asked following survey protocols closely; is confident to approach people and quickly develops rapport.
- Persuasion and building trust
  - Presents a case for participation effectively and logically, responding to concerns and aiming to create a safe and co-operative relationship that encourages full participation.
- Resilience and resourcefulness
  - Demonstrates a positive attitude and can perform with self-control under pressure. Does not give up easily, even when facing setbacks.
- Delivering results
  - Takes ownership of own work and delivers outputs as required in a timely and accurate manner, providing and requesting input when required to support colleagues in a way that is reliable and



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effective; takes personal responsibility for planning, organising and scheduling own time and work to meet project timetable and criteria.

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# 3. The changing role of the field interviewer

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## 3.1 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on surveys

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted in-person survey interviewing, with national lockdowns in 2020-21 leading to a pause in face-to-face fieldwork. Since then, whilst face-to-face fieldwork has restarted, participants described two contrasting experiences of what has been happening to face-to-face interview volumes.

- In some areas of the industry a rich, qualitative survey experience is seen to be essential, e.g., in surveys used to test products and services that involve hall tests, product tests, exit interviews. In these areas participants reported that commissioners were not convinced that other data collection modes would yield comparable data and the face-to-face interviewing approach had been sustained. The volume of face-to-face interviewing work has remained consistent with levels seen before the pandemic, and the nature of the interviewer role has remained unchanged. Issues were focused on workforce supply challenges and lower response rates.
- Elsewhere, the ongoing decline in face-to-face interviewing was felt by participants to have been accelerated by the pandemic, as a result of the higher costs of face-to-face data collection compared with other methods, and due to other survey data collection methods becoming more acceptable to commissioners. As one respondent commented, *“the genie is out of the bottle”*. Participants noted the proliferation of mixed mode surveys, which was attributed to the research funding environment, in which budgets and timescales were shrinking, but with quality expectations remaining high.

## 3.2 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on face-to-face survey interviewers

As a consequence of the increase in mixed mode surveys the role of the field interview has changed. Sequential mixed mode designs are commonplace, and involve participants being initially invited to take in the survey by web and/or telephone. Face-to-face data collection is reserved for those not responding to these other (cheaper) modes, including those harder-to-engage groups. This shift in the focus of face-to-face survey interviewing can fuel a sense among field interviewers, as one participant put it, that *“all the easy interviews are gone”*, and therefore that the task of the face-to-face interviewer is perceived to be that much harder.

Participants spoke of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating the decline in survey response rates, and suggested a variety of reasons for this, some of which were acknowledged to be more enduring than others. These reasons fall into five broad categories:

- Social behaviours and social aversion – a general unwillingness to interact with strangers combined with residual concerns over illness and infection.
- Levels of trust with government.

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- GDPR-related concerns including confidentiality, data access and privacy, and data exploitation – using survey respondents' data for purposes other than those for which the data were originally collected, and consent obtained.
  - Hybrid working and the blurring of work and non-work time, more varied working patterns.
  - A decline in skilled interviewers.

The combination of reduced response rates and a greater focus on hard-to-engage groups was resulting in a fundamental shift in the primary emphasis of the role – from interviewing to finding and engaging individuals to take part. Survey participation might involve the fieldworker carrying out the survey interview or nudging or helping the participant to take part using another mode, such as web. This change in the primary role of the survey fieldworker was felt by participants to be something that field interviewers struggled with, particularly those who valued the interview interaction with members of the public, the satisfaction that comes with achieving a completed interview, and who took pride in their interviewing skills. The shift in focus towards field interviewers seeking and engaging potentially reticent members of the public is perceived by participants as being more demanding, requiring more interviewer-resilience and overall, as being less attractive to traditional and future potential field interviewers.

As a consequence of the greater use of mixed mode methods in surveys, many organisations are currently adapting the face-to-face survey interviewer role or looking to do so. Some organisations are piloting multiskilled interviewers able to complete work face-to-face, via video or over the telephone – whether as part of self-owned case work (i.e., the interviewer is accountable for the sampled case once centrally released, seeing through to final outcome) or as an allocated individual work item. In some cases, participants indicated that this was an organisational response to workforce challenges to drive more value from a smaller pool of interviewers. Such a model was also felt to offer a way of providing interviewers with more work where this is desired by employers.

Participants reflected that more could be done to raise awareness of the purpose of surveys, their value to society and the role of the survey fieldworker in the process, to build trust with the public and support response rates. One participant wonder whether as an industry, *“we are doing enough to put ourselves in the position of the interviewer to help them in their role?”*

However, there was a view among some participants that there would always be a need for face-to-face survey interviewers. Among those expressing this view, the fieldworker role was seen to be essential when survey requirements were more complex e.g., multi-element and multi-household surveys; research requiring bio-samples e.g., saliva sampling, or the administration of standardised screening tools e.g., cognitive function tests.

### **3.3 Face-to-face survey interviewer recruitment challenges**

Participants reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had led to a sharp rise in fieldworker retirement and a fall in the numbers of experienced face-to-face interviewers. These and other losses to the field forces of survey organisation has led to intensive recruitment activity as the industry has recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, recruitment has been challenging, particularly in more rural areas, with several factors contributing to these overall challenges.

One set of factors related to what participants perceived to be a more competitive labour market. The traditional attractiveness of the flexibilities afforded by field interviewing has declined as other sectors and employers now offer similar opportunities. Participants felt there was increasing competition among employers for workers wanting more flexible employment. Moreover, with the growth in hybrid working, participants felt that working outdoors made the role less attractive. As a result, there was a lot of recruitment being carried out, with one participant noting that *“the industry has converged on [the job site] Indeed”*.

For workers wanting more certainty with work guarantees, the uneven availability of field interviewing work made the role less attractive. Some organisations had a requirement for labour availability across two to three days per week. Such a requirement was felt to add to the unattractiveness of the role when organisations could not guarantee the availability of work.

Although recruitment exercises attracted large numbers of initial responses to advertisements, many candidates did not meet the basic criteria of, for example, having a driving licence or being able to travel. Participants noted that there was a high dropout rate as candidates went through the selection and training process, and the nature of the work became apparent. Participants felt that there was a smaller pool of people with the right skills and

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attributes, post-pandemic. Increasingly many research agencies were felt to be recruiting from the same pool, with interviewer exclusivity being felt to have significantly declined in recent years. As one participant reported, *“there is less stickiness; we can't rely on interviewer loyalty”*. Moreover, interviewers can be more selective about what work they choose to accept. Participants reported interviewers' preferences for hall tests, exit interviews and indoor work, rather than work involving travel. Interviewer recruitment was noted to be particularly difficult in more rural areas, where travel was more extensive. These recruitment challenges were ongoing, being fuelled by high levels of churn among the workforce. Participants expressed frustration and disappointment that their significant efforts had reaped limited returns through traditional recruitment methods.

### **3.4 Changes to the recruitment of face-to face survey interviewers**

Despite the impact of the aforementioned retirement spike among interviewers during the pandemic, participants felt that the interviewer demographic still remained older, tending to be populated by a retirement/pre-retirement cohort who were looking for a second job and/or highly flexible work to supplement their incomes. Yet with ongoing recruitment challenges, some participants felt that the industry needed to look beyond this cohort, to other groups of workers, such as students. Indeed, there were examples of interviewer recruitment targeted at students, with participants reporting mixed success. There were also examples of organisations trialling different recruitment strategies. An example was interviewer-led hiring (i.e., referrals), but this was noted to be difficult to operate at scale.

The extent to which there is sufficient appreciation of the field interviewer workforce challenges by survey managers, including commissioners was voiced. Owners of field resources reflected that it was difficult to push back against survey design decisions with operational considerations: *“a lot of design issues are fixed by the time it gets to us”* noted one participant. It was suggested that there could be value in operational (field) leaders being brought in earlier, to shape the survey's design.

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# 4. Field interviewer role changes

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## 4.1 Role definition

Participants working in organisations with a high proportion of projects requiring a rich qualitative experience (e.g., hall tests, product tests, visitor experience, exit interviews) reported no real change in the face-to-face interviewer role as compared with before the COVID-19 pandemic and were not anticipating any changes. For these organisations, the key challenges were recruitment and the geographic distribution of workers.

For organisations with a high proportion of specialist social research projects, the fieldworker role is changing, with additional tasks such as knock-to-nudge, telephone and online (CAVI) interviewing being added to the role. Fieldworkers now need to be persuaders as well as interviewers, and as such need higher levels of motivation, tenacity, resilience, and persuasiveness as their work focuses more with harder-to-engage groups.

One organisation is working towards an aspirational long-term redesign of its survey fieldwork capacity. Its approach, still in progress, involves:

- Removing the distinction between separate field and telephone interviewer roles.
- Clearly defining different levels of interview work, with more senior roles involving more complex data collection, supervisory, support and training responsibilities. Levels are linked with pay and underpinned by development and informal accreditation pathways.
- Seeking to move away from individualised case ownership, in favour of centralised case management, which is seen to offer greater flexibility in terms of covering work. Work will become more fluid and interchangeable, with strong business rules.
- In the long-term, hiring future colleagues into the model based on clearly defined, yet flexible and changeable, work patterns - building in greater certainty of work, and greater certainty of non-work time (or time for a second job). The operational team will therefore be able to mix and match work to employee capability, location, and shift to optimise the balance between labour supply and work demand.
- Reinforcing supervisory roles to ensure they are strongly focused on people and performance management, support, and mentoring – supported by centralised case management to enable this shift in focus.

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## 4.2 Emerging Field Interview Role Post-Pandemic

The changes to the social survey fieldwork role, outlined in section 3, mean that the purpose, accountabilities, competencies and attributes of the field interviewer role are changing from those described in section 2.2. An updated description of the role is presented below, with role changes highlighted in yellow.

### *Role Purpose*

To seek out and engage with people to establish/confirm their eligibility to take part in the survey, gain their cooperation, and to collect data using standardised survey protocols and data collection instruments.

### *Key Accountabilities*

The performance requirements for the role of survey fieldwork are summarised as follows:

- Understand survey goals, purpose and eligibility criteria required for subject selection and any other conditions through reading project packs and participating in briefings and meetings, as required; appreciation of survey fieldwork design.
- Organise own work schedule to complete engagement and/or interviews during the defined fieldwork period.
- Identify and engage positively with the subject to persuade them to take part, selling the benefits of participation whether personal or societal. May also involve informing people of other survey modes and supporting them in accessing their preferred completion mode.
- Complete the survey – whether in person, via telephone or video (CAVI) - closely following the script as required, ensuring all interactions are in line with the survey and, where required, MRS protocols. Ensure responses are recorded accurately in the required format. Complete data acquisition needed for post-survey quality assurance checks.
- Ensure technology (laptop, tablet etc.) for recording data is regularly synced/uploaded to ensure data transfer in line with project requirements. Stays up to date with varied technology required to complete work.
- Works with project team and/or supervisor to support project goals, operating flexibly as required. Complete required administration in a timely manner.

### *Competencies and attributes*

The skills, knowledge and behaviours that are required for the role to be performed as expected are listed below.

#### Skills

- Interviewing, whether face-to-face, by telephone or video conference call.
- Reasonable IT proficiency to operate hardware, software, video conferencing platforms, telephony and other systems, as required.
- Driving licence desirable, often essential.

#### Knowledge

- Survey protocols, MRS guidelines
- Reasonable knowledge of methods and approaches to data collection, understanding their implications for the work and tasks to be completed.

#### Behaviours

- Communication
  - Engages positively, confidently, and warmly with people from diverse backgrounds; conveys information to others in a clear and concise way; ensures consistency in how questions are framed and asked following survey protocols closely; is confident to approach people and quickly develop rapport.
- Persuasion and building trust
  - Structures available information to help others understand the key points, taking account of their perspective and potential concerns; presents a case for participation effectively and logically, responding to concerns and aiming to create a safe and co-operative relationship that encourages full participation; observes and responds to body-language and non-verbal cues, putting self in others' position to appreciate and respond to objections, and to build trust.
- Resilience and resourcefulness

- Demonstrates a positive attitude, performance and self-control under pressure, adversity or in the face of rejection; ensures a positive mindset and ability to bounce back from setbacks; grows from hardships and negative experiences, keeping challenges in perspective; is optimistic, remaining confident in own skills and abilities; keeps going when under pressure having the confidence to try different approaches; is not afraid to seek support.
- Delivering results
  - Takes ownership of own work and delivers outputs as required in a timely and accurate manner, providing and requesting input when required to support colleagues in a way that is reliable and effective; takes personal responsibility for planning, organising and scheduling own time and work to meet project timetable and criteria.
- Change readiness
  - is aware of ongoing change and positively engages and respond to those changes

### 4.3 Implications of role change

Research participants speculated on some issues and considerations, as a result of role change and wider developments.

Among those with performance reward models (pay for each individual survey completed), concerns were expressed about the ongoing feasibility of the model. With a decline in response rates, there is a growing level of risk shouldered by fieldworkers for the reward, as income becomes more uncertain and unpredictable. This is seen to be unattractive to fieldworkers, many of whom are seeking greater certainty, hence a growing pressure for organisations to pay for time spent doing the work. Some organisations pay for different types of interaction, rather than just a completed interview, but organisations using this reward model acknowledged it was complex. As it gets harder to gain the co-operation of the public in surveys, there is also a risk that under a pay system that incentivises the achievement of full interviews, it might also incentivise unethical interviewer behaviours.

These concerns did not elicit any clear sense of direction of travel for participants and it is clear each individual organisation will take their own view. The overriding concern expressed was to ensure any change in approach would be cost effective. As such, there was some speculation about whether a blended approach could be viable, with those organisations thinking of change looking at evolving away from performance pay/piecework by supplementing the workforce with a small group of permanently employed workers. Participants suggested that this could be viable for those organisations with more complex work i.e., mixed-mode, and where there is a requirement for complex field interactions. Under this scenario, a higher skilled, more complex field interviewer role would lend itself more readily to an employed rather than flexible employment model. Moreover, this could be a rising pressure if the role continues to bifurcate between more market research and social research interviewing roles. Participants also felt field interviewers would be likely to choose work that is more focused on interviewing rather than persuasion. Lastly, Government legislation ensuring stronger worker rights for casual and zero-hour workers is a known potential impact on the employment model, which may accelerate movement away from a wholly casual labour force.

The changing role of the survey field interviewer, coupled with declining survey response rates, is leading to organisations thinking hard about this issue despite there being, for many, a strong commitment to the traditional flexible piecework model. There is good reason for this lingering commitment to this piecework model, as the irregular supply of work, and the unpredictability of its nature and location militates against organisations carrying the fixed cost burden of a more permanent workforce. Participants reflected that they felt caught between increasingly strong and divergent forces.

The issue of engagement and the relationship between organisation and fieldwork was reflected upon by participants in the context of the changing interviewer role. A recurring comment was that field interviewers had been kept somewhat detached from the rest of the organisation. Whilst historically, there may have been a logic for doing so, it may no longer be sensible to do so because:

- The lack of connectivity with interviewers may not encourage loyalty in a tight labour market, particularly among experienced interviewers who have greater capacity to pick and choose their work.
- The role potentially needs more support in the field, given its increasingly challenging nature and the requirement for greater interviewer' resilience.
- Of concerns about individual performance and unproductive workers, especially as the logic of pay for performance starts to be eroded by the changing nature of face-to-face interviewer work and the adoption of an hourly rate approach to pay.

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The implication of the changing role of the face-to-face interviewer is that the role of the supervisor becomes more critical, to engage with, support and develop field interviewers. Participants reported that face-to-face interviewer supervision was a general weakness, with the focus of this role on scheduling. In the future, the role will require skills in addressing the more complex matters of supporting individual interviewers working in challenging circumstances, coaching individuals in skills development, boosting their resilience, and managing poor performance in the field.



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# 5. Conclusions

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Discussion of the research findings with participant organisations led to a series of key conclusions being agreed. Of universal impact for all participating survey and market research service providers was the *impact of the labour market issues*. The retirement of skilled field interviewers during the pandemic has been impactful and they are proving difficult to replace. Organisations reported significant numbers of applicants for the roles but with very few having the right skills and appreciation of the basic requirements of the work e.g., travel, driving licence, flexibility. This appears to be a universal issue affecting all areas of the industry. Participants perceived that applicants for low-skill roles make mass applications with little thought for the work (“spamming”). The impact on research organisations is a sense of being overwhelmed with large recruitment volumes that generate few individuals who continue in the role and become successful field interviewers.

Organisations also struggle with being able to supplement their demand for labour from the existing pool of experienced interviewers. They perceive they are all competing for a diminishing, common pool of skilled fieldworker labour. Efforts to target particular groups who could offer casual, flexible labour have seen mixed results (e.g., students) and the industry is suffering, like others, with a general decline in employment rates post-pandemic. Participants also articulated concerns about the outlook for continued strengthening of casual worker rights, which could have an impact on the level of flexibility and cost needed by employers while also potentially diminishing the relative attractiveness of the sector.

The face-to-face survey interviewer *role is diverging*. Although there is little change where research methods demand in-person interaction, for those employers operating more in the social research marketplace the role is:

- Becoming more multiskilled.
- Pivoting towards a greater emphasis on engaging hard to reach/ hard to engage participant groups.
- The relative decline of interviewing as a proportion of time spent in the field.
- Requiring role incumbents to be more tenacious, resourceful, and resilient in the face of persistent rejection.
- Continuing to become more complex, reflecting the use of a wider range of digital technologies and platforms, more sophisticated sampling strategies and greater use of mixed mode data collection methods.

The *existing pay for performance or piecework reward model is being challenged* by the changing nature of the work. At the heart of this challenge is the decline in survey response rates being seen across the industry, but particularly in social research. Participants articulated their perceptions of the risks and their concerns, with some trialling different performance reward models and recruitment methods and approaches, which could be more sustainable. However, there remains a very strong attachment to the current performance reward model due to concerns about the potential cost impact of change. It is perceived this is a fundamental issue because the face-to-face interview approach is much more costly relative to other methods. The situation is still in flux.

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Lastly, participants highlighted a desire for further research, to hear the voices of face-to-face interviewers. There was a view among participants that working as a face-to-face interviewer is more than a job, and that job satisfaction and opportunities to engage with the public are as important as financial reward. Participants reflected that understanding interviewers' perspectives would be beneficial, particularly those interviewers who have joined more recently.

## 5.1 Potential implications and responses to challenges

Organisations will take their own decisions, but several factors are pushing organisations towards *considering higher levels of pay* to address recruitment and retention of talent:

- Continued competition for effective face-to-face interviewers within a dwindling labour pool.
- Increased role complexity.
- Decreased attractiveness of the work, because of the greater use of mixed mode designs and the resulting emphasis on harder to engage groups. This focus inevitably requires workers to undertake activities that are harder and with the potential for more conflict and rejection. The work is arguably just less rewarding than in the past. For the traditional retired or pre-retirement cohorts who seek community engagement as much as supplementary pay, this change may be quite impactful.

High levels of churn and recruitment volumes are ultimately issues for individual organisations to address operationally, but raising the level of pay may help with this. However, efficiency and effectiveness can also be achieved by better focusing and targeting recruitment efforts, and potentially considering AI tools to reduce the administrative burden of sifting applicants.

The *issue of attracting talent* for each organisation is consistent with the efforts of the government to improve levels of employment and address the drop-off in economic activity among older workers. There may be ways to explore collaboration with local or central government to partner for mutual benefit. Organisations should also consider engaging with local enterprise partnerships to benefit from their local labour market intelligence and network opportunities. Thinking of younger workers, participants reported mixed success with student cohorts. Whether within or outside further and higher education and training, this is a cohort where casual work is often valued. Survey organisations could consider thinking through how fieldwork is structured to better meet the needs of such workers, as 2-3 days is probably too much for some. Moreover, survey organisations could consider what they can learn from charity face-to-face fundraising companies, for example, in making an asset of the social purpose of their work that might appeal to younger workers.

A further potential organisational response, and reported by some participants as being trialled, is changing the *balance of the employment model*. Rather than delivering survey fieldwork through a wholly casual workforce, work could be primarily delivered through a core group of permanent or fixed term contracted (employee) interviewers, supplemented by casual workers to manage fluctuations in demand. Organisations where their work profile allows, could potentially introduce a tiered role, in which more complex work and multiskilling is increasingly performed by more permanent workers, with more straightforward work being carried out by a more casual labour pool. This approach reflects the typical employment model we see in the wider economy, in which the employer typically carries the employment risk (i.e., offers permanent employment) where work is more complex, where skill is selected for in the labour market and there is consistent demand for those specific skills. Under these conditions it makes economic sense for the employer to defend its acquisition of labour in order to get a return on its investment in the worker. Conversely, the worker carries the employment risk (i.e. the employer offers only casual or ad hoc labour) where the skills required for work are low, require little training and the time taken for the worker to be effective is short. Under these conditions labour is seen to be readily replaceable, supply is abundant and there is little economic incentive for the employer to retain staff and their limited skills.

Considering the changing demands of the role, a potential way to support the retention of face-to-face fieldworkers will be *increasing the focus on supervisory and management skills* and changing the emphasis of supervisors. Participants typically reported that the role of the fieldworker supervisor was primarily one of schedule organisation, field interviewer management and deployment, and in some cases, being accountable for recruitment of fieldworkers to their local panel. From a recruitment perspective, there have been many positive examples of supervisors being very effective in attracting people into the role of face-to-face interviewer; this can only continue to grow in importance. There is less emphasis on the role of supervisor as being one of coach, support, and manager of effective employee performance. This is unsurprising given the historic lower-level attention given to retention, but as this has changed and the role has become more demanding of the interviewer, organisations may be minded to consider giving more attention to this aspect of the role. Face-to-

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face interviewers could be supported to build more resilience when provided with good coaching, to build their mental strength and endurance, supporting an increase in lengths of tenure. Lastly, if organisations evolve toward having (some) employed workers – or indeed a reward model based on a time basis rather than pay per individual survey - this would require supervisors to be more hands-on with the management of individual performance. Supervisors play a crucial role in improving individual employee performance and in fairly and legally managing an individual performer out of the business.

## **5.2 Potential implications and responses to challenges**

Participants highlighted some areas where a collective industry or sector-level response could potentially address the challenges being faced. This centred on raising the profile of the field interviewer with the public through marketing, social media and/or other methods e.g., character appearance in drama. The purposes of this activity would be to improve public understanding of surveys and the role of the survey interviewer. Whether this would have any impact on survey response rates is unknown. Such activity could also be a means to promote the role of the field interviewer and improve the supply and pool of the labour motivated, which in turn would support the industry in retain a face-to-face survey interviewing capacity.

An idea which could be further explored is to focus on reducing the costs and inefficiencies in the fieldworker labour pool for organisations and centralising efforts to promote the role. Borrowing from ideas of digital networks or digital marketplaces, rather than individual organisations retaining their own interviewer labour, a third party could be contracted to be a source of face-to-face interviewer labour. The third party could manage entry into this labour pool through a form of accreditation for workers. It would be interesting to explore the extent to which digital tools could be used such that organisations requiring interviewers with particular skills and knowledge to cover work of particular types, locations and durations could search a database of accredited labour and push work to them, so reducing the costs of hiring. This database could also potentially include workers' schedules. For workers, projects could be pushed to them reducing their need to chase work and improve their ability to obtain consistent work from multiple employers. This idea would involve formalising what is happening already in the field, by diverting monies away from competition for labour into creating a service. The owners of this service would have a vested interest in promoting the roles and increasing the pool of labour. Accreditation would be important so that workers have a stake in the network and that organisations know they are hiring appropriate workers – reducing demands for assessment and training. Outside of organisations, workers would also have a virtual hub that could potentially be a source of knowledge and community. Engagement with recruitment consultancies or similar would be a useful, to explore the idea further if deemed feasible and/or desirable. However, which entity would be able to represent the industry, acting as a commissioner of the aforementioned third party, is something that would need further consideration, as would the practicalities of setting up such a third party and of interviewer accreditation.

In conclusion, participants wished to support this research work to raise awareness among commissioners of survey work of the changing nature of the face-to-face interviewer role and the associated challenges. There is a clear acknowledgment among practitioners that face-to-face survey work is the gold standard, but providers are under pressure to deliver. Improved appreciation by all interested parties of the context within which survey providers deliver services was felt to be valuable.

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# Appendix A: Interview guide

## *Overview of business for context*

- Going back to before the pandemic – 2018/2019 – what was the typical use for face-to-face interviewers in the suite of research methods available?
  - How did you use/deploy face-to-face interviewers? Is this random probability sampling or quota sampling?
  - Tell us about the role – accountabilities.
  - What did you look for from people to perform the role competently (not exceeding or to a high-performance level)– skills (what they can do), knowledge (what they must know) and behaviours (how they perform e.g., communication)
  - How did you employ face-to-face interviewers? (permanent; temporary; agency etc.)
- What have been some of the major strategic changes in face-to-face fieldwork since the pandemic? Has your use of face-to-face interviewers changed? Have the sampling methods/ types of survey data collection changed?
- What changes are likely to be sustained into the future (the next 5 years)? Do you foresee any other developments in this timeframe?
- What do you perceive to be some of the drivers of change – whether pull (things driven by your organisation, internal factors e.g., nature of work changing, use of technology, cost) or push (things driven by external forces to which you must respond to e.g., labour market, workforce demands etc.)?
- Thinking about the face-to-face interviewer role in the future (c.5 years' time):
  - How will you use them? How do you think the role will change – identify key accountabilities?
  - What does this mean for people - What will you look for from face-to-face interviewers – skills, knowledge and behaviours [normal performance]?
  - Is there any difference you will expect to see in terms of high performing interviewers?
- What do you think these changes will mean for:
  - Workforce planning – how many people you need, the composition of these, where you will find them?
  - The employment model – how you employ them e.g., directly/indirectly; temp/perm etc.?
  - Sourcing – where you will get the people?
  - Recruitment process – how you will select people?
  - Management of people – how they will be managed?
  - Their development – how you will train and develop them?
  - Pay – levels and nature of pay?

Post interview reminder on commercial sensitivities.



