# Handling incoming calls and messages from respondents

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**Background**

The possibility for Statistics Sweden (SCB) to achieve contact via telephone with individuals in interview surveys has drastically deteriorated the last 8-10 years. This counts for almost every segment of the population.

An effect of this difficulty is an accelerating increase of non-response in surveys such as LFS, as well as a drastic increase of costs since more call-attempts are needed to achieve even this lower number of interviews.

There are probably different reasons behind this development. The transition from landline to mobile phones, the increased use of text messages (as an alternative to phone calls) and access to the Internet certainly have changed people’s communication patterns. The increase of telemarketing and the possibility to distinguish unknown (and perhaps unwanted) phone numbers of incoming calls may also have contributed to a socially accepted attitude nowadays that received phone-calls not necessarily need to be answered (if the respondent doesn’t want to at the moment).

According to reactions from some respondents the behavior to not answer calls despite repeated attempts should be interpreted as a signal that the respondent is not interested to speak to SCB at all. Others have a more positive attitude towards participating in surveys but choose to pick up the phone only if the timing of the call is perfect (which might be a tricky thing to figure out). In both these scenarios it is an obvious risk that the respondents get annoyed by being disturbed and finally develop a negative perception of SCB. Thus, from SCB's point of view, dealing with the change in communication patterns that we have seen the last decade, should not only be considered a matter of increasing costs and quality issues related to individual surveys but also a question of long term good-will for the authority.

Different measures have been taken to tackle the difficulties with telephone surveys. Introducing web as an alternative to interviews is one thing (for those who resent telephone interviews or just prefer web). For SCB it is often desirable though to get a first contact via phone, and thereafter offer web for the coming rounds of the survey. One reason is to make sure that we collect data from the right respondent; another reason is that some surveys need the respondents’ permission to present personal background information (e.g. data from a previous interview or auxiliary data from registers) on the screen before allowing them access to their web questionnaire. Another way to reduce call-attempts is by adapting the design of the contact strategy and steer the calls to certain time-slots with regard to the respondents preferences and information such as age and occupation status.

In addition to these measures SCB have stated an ambition in different strategic documents (such as the Communication Strategy) to make it easier for respondents to get in contact with SCB and broaden the ways we communicate with our respondents.

During the last 3-4 years there have also been a couple of tests and smaller experiments at SCB that indicate that it might be a successful strategy not only to inform the respondents before a survey starts that an interviewer will call*,* but also to encourage respondents to contact Statistics Sweden (even if it is to mediate their denial to participate in a survey). It must then be easy for respondents to find relevant contact information to SCB, so this information (e.g. telephone number and e-mail address) should be placed clearly visible in the advance letters.

Even though the interviewers experience great difficulties to get in contact with respondents via outgoing calls it is surprising how many respondents that call back or send text-messages to us. Statistics Sweden receives around 2 500 call-backs and 650 text messages from respondents each month, mostly from LFS-respondents (a survey that contains about 21 000 sample units each month).

This paper aim to describe how these incoming calls has been centralized to a help-desk staffed by interviewers. It will also describe how we document and evaluate these contacts with respondents and finally ask for input and ideas on how we could improve the service or the evaluation of the available process information.

**The respondent help-desk for individual- and households**

In 2012, the change in telephony platform made it possible to forward all call-backs from respondents to a single joint connection. Before 2012 all call-backs were directed to the specific interviewer who had made the call-attempt, and that person most often was busy doing interviews or were not scheduled to work at all. It was merely a coincidence if a respondent succeeded to get in contact with SCB by calling the same number that was shown on their mobile display after missing-calls from SCB. Sms from respondents were not handled at all before 2012.

With the new telephony solution in place a project started with the task to organize the staffing of a joint help-desk for interview surveys, introduce a case-management log for incoming calls and formulate routines for the staff of the help-desk. This was done during 2013. After that, a successive development to obtain relevant process information and technical tools to control the queues of incoming calls, has taken place.

From April 2015 the help-desk is staffed by experienced and well educated interviewers between 0900 am – 2100 pm on Mondays-Thursdays, 0900 am – 1500 pm on Fridays, 1000 am -1500 pm on Saturdays and 1000 am-2100 pm on Sundays. In case of no incoming calls, the interviewers have complementary tasks to take care of.

Since there are many different surveys going on at the same time, the help-desk interviewer must be able to easy identify which individual respondent the incoming call concern. Therefore, a link between the telephone system and the interview system (WinDati) has been built with an interface that makes it possible for the help-desk interviewer to search for information that identifies both respondent-id and what survey they belong to.

The telephone platform also generate quite detailed information on how many call-backs there are on average for different time-periods, which helps the supervisor to schedule enough interviewers in help-desk during the days. Regular monthly reports are generated to support continuous evaluation of the process. The goal is to answer at least 85 % of all the incoming calls within opening hours of the help-desk. Call-backs that by some reason (for example unexpectedly large numbers of simultaneous call-backs in queue) don’t get answered receive an automatic phone message after 3 signals. The recommended treatment of call-backs from respondents is that the service-desk interviewer tries to make an appointment for an interview with the respondent as close in time as possible rather than do the interview directly. If the respondent agrees, an appointment is registered in the interview system and another interviewer do call the respondent (this can usually be done within a very short time period, such as 5 minutes or so). The reason for this routine is to avoid that the service-desk interviewers get occupied by doing interviews and thereby are unable to take care of the calls in queue.

**Monthly paradata reports**

Every month a process report is compiled (auto generated by the telephone system) with information about:

* Total number of call-backs by hour and day
* Number of call-backs who get answered by the help-desk (by hour and day)
* Number of call-backs who result in a hang-up after queuing less than 10 seconds or after 10 seconds or more (by hour and day).
* Number of call-backs outside the hours when help-desk are open

The information above concerns the actual phone-calls and is supposed to reflect the service-level of the help-desk function. The service level is defined as the ratio of the answered call-backs by all call-backs received within the opening hours.

To be able to evaluate the result of all answered call-backs the monthly report also contain data from the help-desk case-management system in accordance with information from the interview system. The results of all the answered call-backs are categorized as follows in the case management system:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category of call-back** | **Result** | **Explanation** |
| **Appointment** | **High precision** | An exact time and date is chosen by the respondent. |
| **Appointment** | **high precision within 1 hour from call-back** | Time chosen by respondent. |
| **Appointment** | **low precision** | A not-so-specific time-slot (such as afternoons, anytime at a certain date och period of dates) chosen by respondent. |
| **No appointment** | **but OK to keep on with call-attempts** | The respondent are unable or unwilling to to make an appointment. |
| **Direct interview** | **made by help-desk** | Only when the respondent requires so. |
| **New contact information** | **Additional phone number** | Increases the chance to get interview the next call-attempt. |
| **Non-response** | **Denial** | Respondent wish to mediate that they do not intend to participate |
| **Non-response** | **Other reason** | Most often when respondent is unable to participate. |
| **Sent to supervisor** | **Hard-to-reach cases** | For example if the respondent needs to be interviewed in  a foreign language. |
| **Existing final code already** | **Interview or non-response** | Can happen when the caller do not know that it is SCB  they are calling back to. |
| **No result registered /Other** |  | Category used when the call is answered by help-desk  but the caller hangs up before anything is said. |

In the case-management system we have recently added information about if it is the sampled individual him- och herself that do the call-back or if it is another person in the household. Sometimes the persons that call back to SCB don’t even know who they are calling and since we sometimes try to reach persons via numbers to other family members it happens quite often that it is someone else but the sampled person that do the call-back.

**Valuable findings and results so far**

The monthly report from the respondent help-desk for interview surveys have now existed for about a year. Some results so far show that:

* The service level has improved during the last year as a result of somewhat different scheduling of the help desk. Service level for the last months this spring has been close to 84 %.
* Almost 50% of the answered call-backs results in an appointment
* More than 50% of the answered call-backs result in an interview within the next call-attempt from SCB.
* The share of answered calls that result in an immediate interview vary between 2 to 5 % of the call-backs.
* Only about 5 % of the answered calls are from respondents who wants to mediate their denial to participate
* Almost 40 % of the call backs are not from the actual respondents but from some other person, most often in the household.
* It is, of course, easier to make valid appointments when talking to the actual respondent than another member of the household. The result shows that more than 95 % of the high/precision appointments are made when it is the actual respondent who calls back.
* New contact information to the respondent is most often, 80% of the cases of that category, given by another person than the sampled person.
* The interviewers that work with the regular data collection are satisfied that they can inform respondents (who sometimes complain about the amount of call-attempts they get), that the help-desk exists and that SCB welcome respondents to call back (even if it is to mediate the wish to mediate a denial to participate)

The plan for the near future is to add information about to what extent the call backs lead to more interviews and fewer outgoing call attempts in the end for the survey. It was shown in a small test in 2013, when the respondent help desk were introduced, that many of the sample units where call backs had been registrated resulted in in interviews within 3 days from the call back, even if a reservation was not made. The final response rate for the sample units where call backs were registered were also very much higher than for the sample as a whole, up to 75% of the call-backs resulted in an interview in the end of the data collection period. This is an indicator that needs to be analyzed in more depth of course to see if the handling of call-backs is a cost effective way to reduce outgoing call-attempts and if it also has some effect on the non-response.

**Further needs for development and analysis**

This paper does not contain diagrams or tables with aggregated data to describe the results and effects of the help-desk function. The reason is that all the process information is not yet easy accessible from a database but comes as separate monthly reports from different systems. To be able to do flexible and more thorough analysis in the future it has been decided that all process data from the case-management system will be transformed to database format and stored in the same database as the interview system. This solution will make it possible to join all process information from the call-backs with process data from the interview system for example:

* Demographic information about respondents (age, gender, region, civil status, labor status (LFS) for example).
* Information about how many call-attempts SCB do on average before (and after) the respondents call back to the help-desk.
* The result of all call-attempts (conducted interview, refusal, new appointment, non-response) after the call-back to help-desk

One question that are especially important to examine in the coming analysis (in order to determine if we need to make changes in the routines for handling call-backs) are if the appointments made by help-desk lead to an interview and if it happens within the first, second or latter call attempt after the call-back.

**Questions and topics to discuss?**

* What are the experiences from other statistical agencies when it comes to handle and analyze call-backs and textmessages from respondent?
* Within SCB there are some arguments that all respondents (both individuals in voluntary interview surveys and enterprises in mandatory web surveys) should be directed to a joint help-desk. So far we haven’t had the practical or technical conditions in place to work on that and we realize that there are very different kind of needs for these different groups. What pros and cons can be identified with a joint help-desk for both enterprise and individual surveys?