

Monitoring CATI Interviewers

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Abstract

Telephone interviewers are routinely monitored to ensure they are following standardized telephone interview procedures. CATI software makes it possible to observe the responses that interviewers enter while listening to both respondent and interviewer. In this paper we present data on the monitoring results for interviewers in recent telephone surveys conducted by our organization, and examine what these results tell us about the performance of our telephone interviewers. We also present the results of comparing two methods of monitoring interviewer performance. One method monitors the entire interview, and the other method samples only a portion of the entire interview. We compare the two methods and answer the question whether one method is better than the other in producing an accurate and representative evaluation of interviewer performance. We discuss the implications these results have for interviewer training and monitoring.

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Introduction

There are a variety of indicators of the quality of data collected in telephone interviews (Biemer & Lyberg, 2003). Monitoring of telephone interviewers is an essential method for ensuring quality control over interview data collected by telephone, and is expected of most surveys. The CDC for instance expects interviewer performance in its monthly BRFSS surveys to be monitored systematically a certain amount of time each month. Monitoring has become easier with computer assisted telephone interview (CATI) systems, which allow unobtrusive observation of the progress of a telephone interview, and allows the monitor to both see what the interviewer's computer is showing and recording, and hear the conversation between the interviewer and the respondent.

Why do we monitor telephone interviewers? Monitoring is used mainly to ensure that interviewers follow procedures for standardized interviewing and do not deviate from the interview script. It is an essential method for minimizing measurement errors in telephone surveys. We know that small changes in how questions are asked can have big effects in survey results, and so we train interviewers to read questions exactly as worded, read all response categories, probe in a nondirective way, and give neutral feedback to respondents. This training is intended to ensure that all questions are asked in a standardized way. Monitoring allows us to check on how well interviewers are doing at following these standardized survey procedures. But there are other good reasons for monitoring telephone interviewers

- It makes interviewers aware that their behavior is being observed so they will stay on task
- It can provide information on an interviewer's strengths and weaknesses and can offer immediate feedback about her/his performance
- It can identify instances of fabricating all or part of an interview or deliberate miscoding the answer to a question to avoid followup questions
- It provides a measure of quality control for the survey sponsor
- It can identify problematic areas in the questionnaire

Procedures for conducting monitoring vary for different organizations. Some have very rigorous coding schemes that produce quantitative data on interviewer's performance, while others are more qualitative involving a checklist of things that went wrong with an interview. Entire interviews may be monitored or only parts of an interview. Monitors may make decisions about who is monitored, or this may be done through a process that randomizes the selection of interviewers. CATI systems can make the job of monitoring somewhat easier since some of these aspects of monitoring are handled by the CATI system. And, monitors are able to see the questions as they are being asked, and the responses that interviewers are entering, while listening in on the interview without being heard by either the interviewer or the respondent.

Our CATI facility uses the following monitoring procedures:

- Supervisors, assistant supervisors, or interviewer specialists as monitors
- A structured interviewer monitoring form used to score an interviewer
- Several CATI monitoring stations
- Monitoring every interviewer for a specified length of time
- Providing immediate feedback

At the beginning of a monitoring shift, supervisors will tell the monitor who they are expected to monitor that day. The monitor will listen to each person for 20 minutes at least, but longer if the interviewer ends up getting a respondent for an interview. The monitor will spotcheck the calls that do not result in a complete and record number of rings, accuracy of coding, time between calls, etc. Supervisors will keep track of who has been monitored that month to ensure equal coverage.

There has been very little research on monitoring of telephone interviewers. We found only a few references in the research literature on monitoring of CATI interviewers. Couper, et al (1992) proposed that monitoring be more systematic, with random assignment of interviewers, and the use of an objective scoring sheet. Currivan, Dean, and Thalji (?) improved on this by developing a monitoring form that collects more objective data on interviewer behaviors.

The problem with the research on monitoring is that interviewers who are well trained tend not to make a lot of mistakes. Thus, the datasets for studies of monitoring tend to be fairly sparse, which makes analysis quite difficult.

So we don't know much about monitoring, either its effectiveness, or its effect on interviewers. Since monitoring is costly to an organization we want to make it as efficient and effective as possible. Thus, with our own surveys we generally limit monitoring to between 5% and 15% of interviews, and try to have at least one monitor for every 10 interviewers. An additional goal is to monitor every interviewer at least once a week.

Our standard monitoring procedure is to only monitor an interviewer for up to twenty minutes, mainly to ensure that we are able to monitor all of our interviewers during any given week. During the time that a monitor is listening to an interviewer, they listen to all calls made by the interviewer. If the interviewer is on an interview, the monitor listens to the presentation of each question, how the interviewer deals with proper neutral probes and clarifications and the feedback offered to the respondent. The monitor scores each question on the Monitor Scoring Form (attached). After scoring questions, other elements of the interview are scored such as how courteous the interviewer was and how effectively the interviewer established and maintained proper rapport with the respondent. Finally, the monitor sums up in a few words what went well with the interview and what could be improved.

Research Questions

Our main purpose in this paper is to assess different ways to monitor CATI interviewers to determine which is most effective and efficient, and to assess the overall monitoring experience for telephone interviewers. Since our standard procedure is to only monitor a single interviewer for 20 questions, we wondered whether we might be missing important information about an interviewer's performance by not listening to an entire interview. And we wanted to assess how interviewers felt about the monitoring session and whether or not they found it to be a helpful experience or not. The survey research literature does not provide any information on how interviewers react to being monitored.

To assess the different monitoring protocols, we examined the following monitoring methods:

1. The first was our standard monitoring policy of monitoring interviewers for 20 minutes, during which time the monitor listens to all calls made by the interviewer. During the monitoring session, if the interviewer obtained consent to begin an interview with a respondent, the monitor then switched to one of the other two monitoring methods.
2. The second method requires the monitor to listen to an entire interview from beginning to end, regardless of the length of the interview
3. The third method involves listening to only a part of the interview of at least 20 questions.

Our main interest in comparing these methods was to assess whether listening to a complete interview provides more information about an interviewer's performance than listening to a partial interview, or listening to a 20-minute segment of interviewer calls.

The main questions explored in this study include:

- Is it necessary to monitor all of a completed interview?
- Is it more efficient to monitor only a segment of an interview?
- What are interviewers reactions to being monitored?
- What are monitors reactions to monitoring and giving feedback?

Methodology

The data for this paper come from monitoring sessions carried out in our computer assisted telephone interview (CATI) facility during April 2007. Monitoring sessions covered five different surveys that varied in population, content, and length. Five monitors conducted a total of 130 monitoring sessions with 27 interviewers, or an average of almost five sessions per interviewer. Monitors used a monitoring scoring form (attached) to score each interviewer's performance and to record which errors were made for which questions.

Monitors were instructed to start with the 20-minute monitoring protocol, and then if the interviewer they were monitoring began an interview, the monitor was to switch to one of the other two monitoring protocols, either the fully completed interview session, or the

partial interview session. Monitors were instructed to alternate between these two monitoring protocols.

To assess interviewer reactions to being monitored, interviewers were asked to complete a one-page questionnaire about their experience each time they were monitored. To ensure that interviewers would give us candid responses, we did not ask for any identifying information on the form, and we provided an envelope, and asked that they slide their sealed envelope under a locked door to the Director's office.

Results

The analysis focused on the kinds of errors committed by interviewers, the differences between the types of monitoring sessions, interviewer reactions to being monitored, and monitor reactions to monitoring.

Results of the three conditions

The results are based on a total of 130 monitoring sessions, of which 60 (46%) consisted of 20 minute monitoring sessions, 39 (30%) were partial interviews, and 31 (24%) were complete interviews. A total of 95 monitor session evaluation forms were completed by interviewers and included in the analysis.

For the 20 minute monitoring sessions, the average of nine sample cases were listened to before an interview was reached, or before the end of the session was reached. The range of sample cases listened to varied from 2 to 21, with a standard deviation of 4.5 sample cases. Of these 60 monitoring sessions, errors were found in only 28 of them. For 17 sessions there was only one error identified, and for another 7 sessions, two errors were found. The most frequently made error by far with 22 errors was improper disposition coding (C103). The second most frequent error was allowing too many rings (C101) made by 4 interviewers. The remaining four errors included: not allowing enough rings (C102), improper refusal prevention (C104), not responding to the respondent when they pick up (C106), and entering the wrong response category (C26).

For the partial interview monitoring sessions, the average number of questions that were monitored was 21 with a standard deviation of 12 questions. For the fully completed

interview monitoring sessions, the average number of questions that were monitored was 65 with a standard deviation of 33.

Monitoring fully completed interviews involves listening to more questions, and thus more opportunity to find mistakes. The total number of questions that had errors was calculated for each monitoring session. For the fully completed interview monitoring sessions, the average number of question errors was 5 with a standard deviation of 4.8. For the partial interview session, the average number of question errors was 2.6 with a standard deviation of 2.8. So the fully completed interview sessions had about twice as many errors as the partial interviews, however, the fully completed interviews also included more than twice as many questions, so there was more opportunity to find errors in the fully completed interview monitoring sessions.

Full Interview	Partial Interview
65 average questions monitored	21 average questions monitored
5 average errors	2.6 average errors
1 error for every 12 questions	1 error for every 7 questions
Average monitoring score of 89	Average monitoring score of 90.6

However, it is interesting that monitors on average find one error for every 7 questions in the partial interview monitoring sessions, but only one error for every 12 questions in the fully completed interview monitoring sessions. This difference was significant at the $p \leq .05$ level ($t=1.96$, $df=67$). This result seems counterintuitive since the number of errors per question should be the same regardless of the length of the monitoring session. One possible explanation for the difference is that monitors may get tired and bored listening to a longer interview, and thereby miss errors that might otherwise be caught in a shorter monitoring session. Either this or they may miss errors because they are writing comments for other errors in questions, and thus are not paying as much attention to succeeding questions.

Monitors produce a score for each interviewer, based on their performance, with the score varying between 0% to 100% performances. Different errors are given different weights in the scoring system, so that more serious errors (such as skipping an entire question) are weighted more heavily than less serious errors (such as skipping a word in a question).

There was no significant difference in these monitoring scores between the fully completed interview sessions and the partial interview sessions. The average score for the fully completed interview session was 89 with a standard deviation of 10, and for the partial interview session it the average score was 90.6 with a standard deviation of 11.9 and the difference between these two types of monitoring sessions was not significant.

The two types of monitoring sessions should identify the same kinds of errors. But, since the fully completed interview sessions may include more questions, it is possible that this kind of monitoring session may also identify more errors and a larger range of errors. Since the fully completed interview session includes more questions than the partial interview sessions, are more different kinds of errors identified in the fully completed interview session? To answer this question we analyzed the specific errors that monitors identified.

Error Codes Not Used

- C1 Interviewer doesn't ask for final comments
 - C2 Rewording material from FAQs
 - C3 Reading too fast
 - C4 Reading too slow
 - C5 Interviewer reveals too much information about him/her self
 - C6 Fails to maintain a professional relationship with the respondent
 - C7 Interviewer consistently adds "and" or "um" to the beginning of questions
 - C8 Interviewer allows the respondent to digress
 - C9 Interviewer fails to establish rapport with the respondent
 - C10 Improper refusal prevention or failure to give one
 - C17 Skipped whole question
 - C22 Interviewer fails to initiate the "feedback game" when it is needed
 - C23 Giving feedback more than 50% of the time when not needed
 - C24 Feedback lacks variety; uses one or two phrases/words throughout
 - C25 Giving incomplete or incorrect information during the introduction
 - C29 Incorrect transitional phrase (i.e., "how about" instead of "the next one is")
 - C31 Use of probe that misleads the respondent
 - C32 No clarification given when the respondent asks for one
 - C34 Interviewer fails to address a matter of possible concern
 - C105 Failure to give refusal prevention
 - C107 Too much time between calls
-

 C108 Not coding a case in a timely manner

 C109 Not calling the case

First, there are apparently some kinds of errors that are so infrequent, that they were not identified in either monitoring method. The table above displays these infrequent errors. It's not clear what the reasons are that the errors in the table above were not used, and whether this was mainly because these errors did not occur, or because they were missed by the monitors.

Number of Instances of Different Errors by Type of Monitoring Session

Error Code	Fully	Partial
	Complete Interview	Interview
C11 Added a word to the question	10	9
C12 Deleted a word from the question	15	10
C13 Substituted a word	3	9
C14 Interviewer did not reread the question, after being cutoff by R	8	4
C15 Chose the wrong word, or failed to choose a word in parens	1	0
C16 Failed to give proper emphasis to words in CAPS	1	0
C18 Gave a directive probe – suggested an answer	3	2
C19 Failed to probe when needed	2	5
C20 Failed to read back open-ended comments/responses	4	2
C21 Gave non-neutral or directive feedback	0	1
C26 Entered wrong response category or comments	6	2
C27 Interviewer supplied own definition	1	1
C28 Failed to reread F5 notes or comments	6	2
C30 Used probe that incorrectly excludes possible answers	1	2
C33 Gave directive or inappropriate clarification	2	1
C35 Rereads only a portion of a question or response categories	3	0
C103 Improper final disposition coding	1	0
TOTAL	67	50

The errors that did occur and that were observed by the monitors tended to be identified in both types of monitoring sessions, the fully completed interview session and the partial interview session, and with the approximate same frequency. The table above displays these errors and shows that some errors are made more often by interviewers than other kinds. For instance, the most frequently made error is omitting a word from a question, which accounts for over a fifth of all errors. Adding a word to a question is the next most frequent error, accounting for 16% of all errors. Not rereading a question after being cutoff by a respondent is the third most frequent error, accounting for about 10% of all errors. On the whole the types of errors that are found in monitoring sessions are similar regardless of the type of monitoring that is done. The few differences that are observed in the table below may simply reflect chance differences due to differences in which interviewers were monitored in the two types of sessions.

Interviewer reactions to being monitored

The relationship between monitor and interviewer can be problematic because while monitors come from the ranks of interviewer, the monitoring situation puts them in an evaluative position over the interviewer being monitored. Some interviewers are not perturbed by this situation, but many others are made uncomfortable by evaluations of their performance.

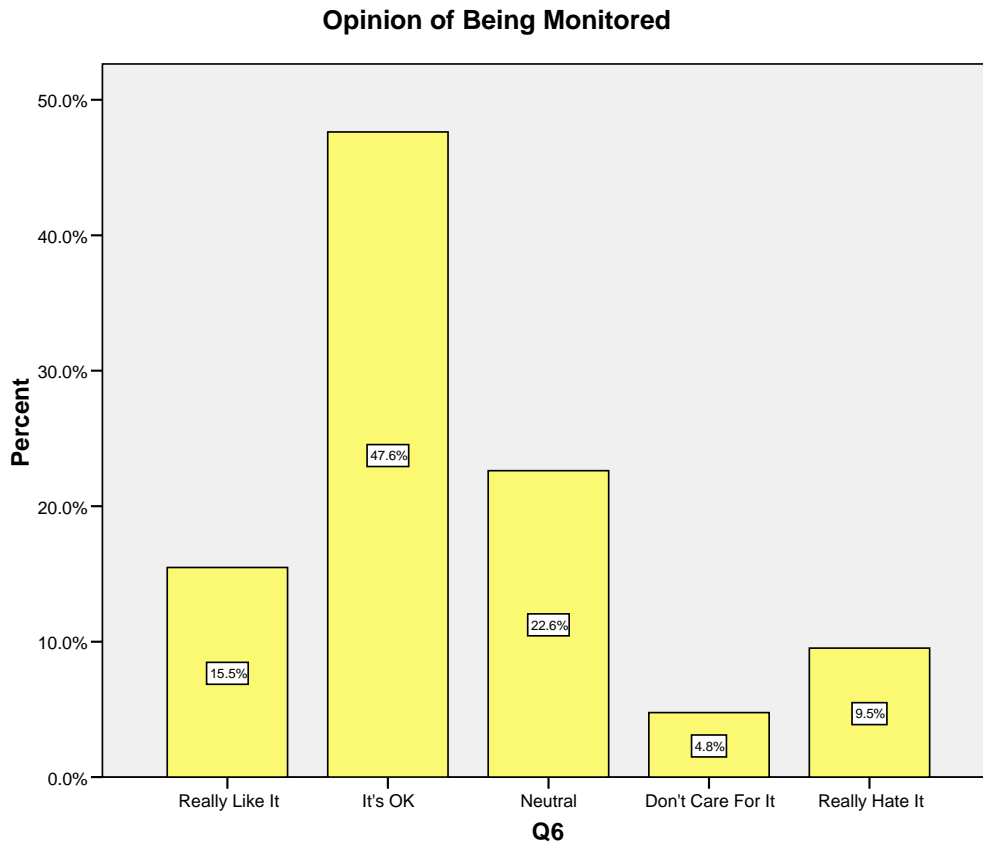
On the whole interviewers seem to be okay with being monitored. They understand the need for it and accept it. However, they would prefer that the monitoring experience not be an evaluation of them; instead they want monitors to give them feedback on how they could do better. Here's a comment from an interviewer that expresses this view:

"It is getting better. I feel like it is more of a learning experience instead of a thrash on the interviewer experience. I see monitoring as more of a mentor program. I feel as a mentor they should be excited and willing to help, offering tools here and tricks there. I DO NOT however feel that it is a way to separate the team. Essentially we are all a team, working together to reach a set goal. I do have to say that being a monitor should not imply that you are better than anyone, just

more experienced in the company. So with that said I would say that _____ is the ONLY person I have seen fulfill my expectations of monitors. I would have to commend him on his ability to give me positive, useful feedback. He told me how to fix the problems. He did not just point them out."

Interviewer opinions of the monitoring experience

Question	% Positive	% Neutral Not Sure	% Negative
What are your overall feelings about this monitoring session?	93%	5%	2%
How helpful was the Monitor's feedback?	92%	1%	7%
How professional or unprofessional would you say the Monitor was in giving you feedback about your performance?	98%	0%	2%
Will the Monitor's feedback help you to improve your interviewing skills?	89%	3%	8%
How strongly do you agree or disagree that monitoring is necessary to improve telephone interview performance?	92%	0%	8%
What is your opinion of being monitored in general?	63%	23%	14%



Interviewer's ratings of the monitoring session were overall quite positive, with over 90% indicating that the monitor's feedback was positive, professional, and helpful. Over 90% also agreed that monitoring is necessary to improve telephone interview performance.

Monitor reactions to the monitoring session

We talked with our monitors to get their reactions to the monitoring methods and to understand how they view the work of monitoring. Monitors have a difficult job because they often have to give interviewers a poor evaluation of their performance and to do it in a way that encourages the interviewers to change their behavior. They also have to deal with confrontational interviewers who may deny that they made the errors that the monitor has identified. The hardest thing about the job is knowing how to give feedback, especially if it's bad news. The best thing about the job is seeing interviewers improve and not make the same mistakes the next time they are monitored.

Our monitors would like more training on how to give feedback properly, and they also would like opportunities to meet as a group so they can share information and techniques for dealing with interviewers. Monitors tended to prefer monitoring complete interviews rather than partial interviews because they felt it gave them more opportunity to observe interviewers behavior.

Discussion and Conclusions

There are advantages and disadvantages to monitoring, but it is a necessary part of quality control in telephone interviewing. Among the advantages are that interviewers know they are or will be monitored thus encouraging them to pay attention to how they do their jobs; and we have quality control data that can be presented to clients and others to demonstrate that interviews were properly conducted. Among the disadvantages are that some interviewers do not like to be monitored, and it adds cost to the survey effort.

The most effective and efficient monitoring procedure was the partial monitoring session, because it takes less time than a full interview, finds more errors per question, and arrives at a monitoring score that is similar to monitoring scores for a fully completed interview session. Given the failure of the fully completed interview monitoring session to produce any additional information about the quality of the interview, it is difficult to justify the added time and cost for this type of monitoring.

Interviewer reactions to being monitored were overall positive. But, some interviewers really do not like to be monitored, which may be explained by unprofessional monitoring behavior. Here for instance is an example of one interviewer's comment to being monitored:

"The monitor was very unprofessional; he never makes eye-contact, never tells you how to fix mistakes and comments in a very rude way. Made me feel incompetent."

On the other hand, being monitored can be a very positive experience as seen in this comment from another interviewer:

“She was very positive, even though I got 100% she still offered some helpful feedback and complimented the positive aspects of my complete. It was a good experience. ”

Monitor reactions to conducting a monitoring and feedback session are also positive on the whole. However, one problem is that monitors rarely get feedback themselves on their own performance as monitors.

The results of this study shows us that monitoring is a useful thing to do. Besides providing a measure of quality control, it also helps to train interviewers in proper interviewing technique, and gives them feedback on their performance as interviewers. It is doubtful that most interviewers would improve without this kind of feedback.

It is fortunate that the results show the partial interview monitoring method to be as effective as the fully completed interview method, since this method is generally easier for the monitors to implement, and also less costly to do. The findings show that monitoring an entire interview adds very little that is not already available from monitoring partial interviews.

The results suggest that we could do better at training our monitors to provide feedback that is professional and positive, and that doesn't alienate interviewers. While most interviewers seem to understand the need for monitoring, we could also do better to help them understand the reasons for monitoring. We require procedures to ensure that interviewers are following standardized interviewing protocols.

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Monitoring Form

Initials	Name	Interviewer Signature		Monitor	Project
Date	ID#	Spotcheck	Complete		
Q#	Section 1: Comments				Points
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					
7.					
8.					
9.					
10.					
11.					
12.					
13.					
14.					
15.					
16.					
17.					
18.					
19.					
20.					
Section 1: Sub-Score (Max=80 Points)					
What Went Well:		Info Given	Accurate	Incomplete	False N/A
		Refusal Prev.	Persuasive	Weak	Fail N/A
		Pace	Satisfactory	Slower	Faster
		Volume	Satisfactory	Louder	Softer
		Clarity	Satisfactory	Enunciate	Pronounce
What Could Be Improved:		Courtesy	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	
		Rapport	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	
		Conclusion	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	N/A
		Professionalism	Satisfactory	Too Stiff	Too Casual
		FAQ's	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	N/A
Section 2: Sub-Score (Max=20 Points)		Total Score: (Max=100 Points)			

WSU-SESRC Monitoring Codes

Code	Mistakes (Full complete or Partial Complete review)	? Deduction	Overall Deduction
1	Int doesn't ask for final comments during conclusion		Conclusion
2	Rewording material from FAQs		FAQ's
3	Reading too fast		PACE
4	Reading too slow		PACE
5	Int reveals too much information about (him/her)self		Professionalism
6	Failed to maintain professional relationship with R		Professionalism
7	lwr consistently adds "and" or "um" to the beginning of a question		Professionalism
8	Int allows R to digress		Rapport
9	Int failed to establish rapport with R		Rapport
10	Improper refusal prevention or failure to give one		Ref Prev
11	Added word to the question (each word)	1	
12	Deleted word from the question (each word)	1	
13	Substituted word each word	2	
14	R cut off int / int didn't re-read the question	2	
15	Chose wrong word / Failed to choose word in the parenthesis	1	
16	Failed to give emphasis to words in CAPS / Gives improper emphasis	1	
17	Skipped whole question	4	
18	Directive probe / suggested an answer	4	
19	Failure to probe when needed	4	
20	Failure to read back open ended comments / responses	4	
21	Non-neutral feedback or directive feedback was given	2	
22	Interviewer fails to initiate "The Feedback Game" when it is needed (this is a subjective decision on the part of the individual monitor)	0	
23	Giving feedback more than 50% of the time when not needed	2	
24	Feedback lacks variety - uses one or two phrases/words throughout	1	
25	Giving incomplete or incorrect information during introduction	4	
26	Entered wrong category / remarks / answer	4	
27	When the interviewer supplies own definition	4	
28	Failure to re-read F5 notes or comments	4	
29	Each incorrect transitional phrase (ex. "how about" instead of "next one is")	2	
30	Probe that incorrectly excludes possible answers	4	
31	Probe that misleads the R	4	
32	When a clarification is asked for by R but not given	4	
33	Directive on in appropriate clarification is given	4	
34	Int failed to address a matter of possible concern	4	
35	When only a portion of a question or categories are re-read (not including frame of reference)	2	
		?	Overall
Code	Mistakes (20 minute monitoring session)	Deduction	Deduction
101	Too many rings		
102	Not enough rings		
103	Improper coding (AM, BZ, GB, PB)		
104	Improper refusal prevention		
105	Failure to give refusal prevention		
106	Not responding to the R when they pick up		
107	Too much time between calls		
108	Not coding a case in a timely manner		
109	Not calling the case		

Monitoring Session Form

What Project: _____

Monitor Name: _____

Q1. What are your overall feelings about this monitoring session?

1. VERY POSITIVE
2. SOMEWHAT POSITIVE
3. NEUTRAL
4. SOMEWHAT NEGATIVE
5. VERY NEGATIVE

Q2. How helpful was the Monitor's feedback?

1. VERY HELPFUL
2. SOMEWHAT HELPFUL
3. NOT VERY HELPFUL
4. Not Sure

Q3. How professional or unprofessional would you say the Monitor was in giving you feedback about your performance?

1. VERY PROFESSIONAL
2. SOMEWHAT PROFESSIONAL
3. SOMEWHAT UNPROFESSIONAL → *Please use the back side of this form*
4. VERY UNPROFESSIONAL → *to tell us why you feel this way*
5. Not Sure

Q4. Will the Monitor's feedback help you to improve your interviewing skills?

1. DEFINITELY YES
2. PROBABLY YES
3. PROBABLY NOT
4. DEFINITELY NOT
5. Not Sure

Q5. How strongly do you agree or disagree that monitoring is necessary to improve telephone interview performance?

1. STRONGLY AGREE
2. SOMEWHAT AGREE
3. SOMEWHAT DISAGREE
4. STRONGLY DISAGREE
5. Not Sure

Q6. What is your opinion of being monitored in general?

1. REALLY LIKE IT
2. IT'S OK
3. NEUTRAL
4. DON'T CARE FOR IT
5. REALLY HATE IT

Q7. What can we do to make monitoring more beneficial to you as an interviewer?

Please put your completed evaluation in the envelope, seal it, and slide it under the Director's door (located in the hallway near the front door).

<http://www.sesrc.wsu.edu/tarnai/papers.htm>