Survey Design Basics for **Information Professionals**

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Within a records and information management (RIM) or information governance (IG) framework, surveys can be useful information-gathering tools. They can represent a formal activity where survey results are to be used for a high-stakes response – for example, in a setting where pending regulatory or safety issues could have a global impact. Or, they can be a more informal effort where data is gathered for internal purposes – for example, to help determine the success of new procedures.

For ARMA International's Information Governance Professional (IGP) certification program, the IG DACUM chart (an educational aid available at *www.arma.org/docs/igp/dacumchart1012.pdf*) lists researching, interviewing, and surveying skills in its "Managing Information Risk and Compliance" component. These three skills underpin the analytical capabilities of a well-rounded IGP.

While this article does not provide an all-inclusive discussion of surveys, it does provide a starting point. By introducing basic design concepts, it lays the foundation on which RIM and IG experts can build a framework of knowledge.

Defining Survey Terminology

Those who provide information in surveys are known as *participants* or *respondents*. The survey questionnaire, designed to solicit information for analysis, is often referred to as the survey *instrument*, and the individual questions or statements may be called *items*. In this article, these terms are used interchangeably: *participant* and *respondent, questionnaire* and *instrument,* and *question* and *item*.

Constructing Survey Items

Open-ended survey items urge participants to provide their own answers rather than tick a box. These can be useful in eliciting the attitudes and perspectives of the participants. One example of an open-ended question is this: "How could your vital records program be improved in 2017?" In contrast, *closed-ended* items ask participants to select an answer from a list.

Note: When doing in-person, interview-based surveys, it can be better to start with open-ended items to establish rapport between the interviewer and the participant.

Compiling the responses to open-ended items is usually more time intensive and labor intensive than closed-ended items, whose responses are limited by a standardized, restricted format.

There are two guiding principles for constructing closed-ended items:

1. Include all possible responses.
2. Construct the item so the participant will choose one response.

Regarding the latter principle, there are times an item will allow multiple answers. This is acceptable as long as the data processing, whether manual or automated, allows for it. It is therefore necessary to plan for this type of scenario.

Creating Survey Items

When creating items for a survey instrument, there are several rules to bear in mind:

- Determine whether an open-ended or a closed-ended format would better serve the data collection objective. It is an option to include both formats in a single instrument.
- Use unambiguous, concise wording when writing items. It may help to have another person review the items for clarity and succinctness.
- Avoid "double-barreled" questions where more than one idea is presented. Each item should have a unique and singular intent.
- Keep items as simple as possible. Complex statements may confuse respondents and taint your results. The use of negative terms, such as "not," can lead to confusion as well.
- Ensure items are suitable for the types of individuals who will be responding. Individuals should understand the items (e.g., language, syntax) and be able to provide competent responses. Note that it may be necessary to provide accommodations for individuals with disabilities.
- Be mindful of subject matter that could be considered controversial. Some participants might prefer a private, remote setting for sensitive matters. When given proper privacy, respondents are more likely to answer honestly and without inhibition.
- Engage individuals on subjects of relevance to them. They are more likely to cooperate and answer honestly if the subject matter is interesting or familiar.
- Avoid bias-laden language. Individuals who are misled by the wording, even subtly or indirectly, can be nudged to provide a particular type of response. For instance, an item referencing a well-recognized industry expert may influence respondents to align their responses to reflect that expert's opinion.

Whichever format is chosen, include clear instructions within the survey instrument that address issues such as the purpose of the survey; the aggregation/use/storage of participants' responses; the time allotted for item completion; and so on.

Provide specific guidance for delivering responses to survey items, such as "Fill in the box □ to the left of the item completely" or "Write your response in the highlighted area." If using *contingency items* – those requiring a response based on the answer to some other item – it should be clear how the questionnaire progresses from one section to the next.

Sometimes selected items are grouped in the questionnaire. While this approach can be effective for formatting, especially if the items have a similar response format, it can encourage a *response-set* from participants. That is, participants can develop a response pattern that may not accurately reflect their opinions. For instance, a participant might just select "agree" or "disagree" for all items in a section, regardless of each item's wording.

Constructing the Survey Instrument

When constructing a survey instrument, be sure to:

- Organize and position the instructions so they can be read easily and understood properly.
- Logically arrange items so participants can easily navigate the questionnaire.
- Offer a flow of items that is orderly, neat, and visually uncluttered.

One way to gain insight into the appropriate construction for a given survey is to conduct a pre-test using individuals for whom the survey subject has relevance. With pre-testing, it is possible to identify correctable errors so they can be fixed prior to launching the survey.

Administering the Survey

In academic, business, or scientific settings, surveys can be administered in a variety of ways. In an *interview survey*, the items are read to participants and the responses are collected by the interviewer. The interviewer should remain neutral. Respondents should not be influenced by gestures, body language, or facial expressions.

The *self-administered survey*, conducted by electronic or non-electronic means, allows respondents to complete the survey instrument on their own in an individual or group setting.

When administering an online or electronic survey, know that technological glitches are possible, which will frustrate respondents. Before the survey launch, test all hardware and software tools to be sure there are no device limitations, programming malfunctions, or clumsy formatting that can cause respondents to become frustrated and not complete the questionnaire.

Additionally, respect the respondent's schedule; avoid creating surveys that take more than 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

Determine the optimal time of day and the best day of the week for e-mail distribution of a survey. If the e-mail is transmitted on a day immediately following a holiday, it might get overlooked in a full inbox when the potential respondent returns to work. Know also that spam filters may redirect some e-mail to junk folders.

Improving the Response Rate

The *response rate* is the number of individuals taking part in a survey divided by the number of possible participants. For example, if 100 employees are targeted and 30 employees complete and return the questionnaire, the response rate is 30%. In a business setting, an acceptable response rate may be much lower than it would be in a scientifically rigorous setting where safety is an issue.

There are a few tactics that can improve the response rate, such as sending periodic reminders through the postal mail or through texting, offering small payments or the possibility to win a prize drawing, and providing the survey results to respondents.

For paper-based surveys that are sent through postal mail, provide pre-addressed packaging and pre-paid postage. Paper questionnaires can often be designed such that no packaging is needed; the form can be "fold and seal" for postage-paid, convenient mailing.

The response rate is an important variable because of the relationship between the number of respondents and the *error* inherent to the survey results. In general, as the number of respondents rises, the level of error decreases.

Going Forward

Surveys are a powerful data collection option. No single technique is perfect for all information-gathering purposes; each has its own strengths and weaknesses.

In business environments, surveys can play a major role in the improvement of RIM programs, particularly when a greater understanding of an organization's risk or compliance-related activities is needed. When used properly, surveys can help you begin to "know what you don't know."

To learn more about surveys and other aspects of research within the context of RIM and IG, see ARMA International's *Research Methods for Records and Information Professionals,* which is available for purchase at *www.arma.org/go/prod/A4970.* E

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