

## Survey Best Practices

Draft Jan 23 2017\_GL

Guideline No.:	-GU1
Policy Reference:	
Category:	[Assigned by Policy Manager]
Policy Sponsor:	[Role/position with accountability for this guideline]
Current Approved Date:	[By approver]
Effective Date:	[Determined by approver]

## Purpose

This guideline applies directly to Policy XXXX, Surveys. This guideline identifies best practices for survey design and implementation.

Following this guideline should result in:

- Getting reliable results, giving better value
- Achieving high survey response rates through avoiding survey fatigue
- Avoiding inefficient use of Institute resources
- Ensuring compliance with relevant laws and regulations such as Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) FOIPOP and Canada’s Anti-Spam Legislation (CASL)
- Effective publication and use of results across the Institute

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## Guideline

### 1. Pre-Design Considerations

Before starting the design process, the survey designer/analyst should consider the following aspects of a survey:

**Population and sampling methodology:** What or who is the targeted population? Will the entire population be surveyed, or a sample? If the former, is a sample an option that could be considered to lessen the burden on students/faculty/staff? If the latter, what is the sampling methodology and is it appropriate? (Refer to the section below, “Aspects and phases of a Survey

Research Project” for further information.)

**Overall impact:** What will the impact of the survey be? Will the research positively or negatively impact the Institute? Does the survey overburden respondents?

**Resources:** What resources will be needed to conduct the survey? (Activities could include: literature research, administrative errands such as collecting names and email addresses, printing, in-person delivery of surveys, and data entry.) Will it divert staff resources away from other projects and needs?

**Time allotment:** A good quality survey may take as long as several months to develop if the analyst has to explore a topic about which relatively little is known. If the survey needs to be administered in a short period of time, the requesting department may need to consider alternative ways for collecting relevant data such as focus groups or face-to-face interviews.

## 2. Composing Survey Questions

- Survey questions should not reveal identifiable personal information (a participant’s own or that of another student, staff or faculty member). See the sample privacy statement in the next section.
- Survey questions should not be “leading” or contain jargon or technical terms that may not be understood by all respondents.
- Response categories should reflect a comprehensive array of choices, including “not applicable”, “don’t know”, or “other” where appropriate.
- Limit the use open-ended questions; as much as possible, position these at the end of survey instrument.
- Short, focused surveys generate more responses and minimize imposition on the respondents’ valuable time.
- Surveys that skip respondents over questions that are not relevant feel shorter and more pertinent to the respondent, and yield more accurate data (e.g., applying conditional breaks).
- Survey invitations or correspondence should include a statement that clearly explains:
  - Who has been asked to participate
  - The purpose of the survey
  - That participation in the survey is voluntary
  - That the respondent can skip questions he or she would prefer not to answer (mandatory response may be appropriate if the survey targets a narrow population)
  - Whether responses provided will be treated as anonymous and/or confidential data
  - The length of time the survey might take to complete
  - Timeline for the survey (how long the survey will be available)
  - Incentives
  - Contact information in case the participant has questions or concerns
  - How information from the survey will be reported and used
  - Option to opt out from all Institute surveys – using the “unsubscribe link”
  - Confidentiality statement (FOI/POP) or a link to privacy policy. See the section on privacy.

### 3. Survey Design Tips

Keys for a well-designed survey include the following:

- Relevant demographic questions that are not burdensome or inappropriate (see Designing Appropriate Questions document for examples)
- Focused questionnaire with no unnecessary questions
- Clear and easy to understand questions – unambiguous, simple sentences
- Separate questions rather than several related questions imbedded into a large one; otherwise (for example), a participant may respond to the first part but ignore subsequent parts of the multi-part question
- An “Other” option which is followed by “Please explain” for additional insights
- Conditional breaks or skip patterns for questions to help participants respond to what is relevant and ultimately save time
- Logical sequencing of questions (this is especially important when you have a skip pattern, to ensure flow through the questionnaire)
- Allowing for no sample or survey biases. Biases are associated with nonresponse, errors in answers to questions, and errors in sampling (for further information on biases, refer to the Statistics Canada publication, [Survey Methods and Practices](#))

### 4. Privacy Protection

BCIT must take measures to protect the privacy of survey participants. The following provides a sample privacy statement as used by Institutional Research, usually placing it just after the survey title.

#### **Sample Privacy Statement**

*The collection of any personal information you provide is permitted in accordance with section 26(c) of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA), which allows BCIT to collect personal information for purposes related to and necessary for its operating programs and activities.*

*Any information that you provide by answering the survey questions will be used on an aggregated (not individually identifiable) basis for analysis and reporting, and will be provided anonymously. Please do not provide any information that would identify yourself or others.*

*If you have any questions about BCIT’s privacy practices, contact Cynthia Kent, Associate Director, Privacy.*

*If you have any questions or concerns about this survey, please contact [provide contact person’s name or position, and BCIT email address].*

To additionally safeguard privacy, those responsible for managing the survey should disable all functions in the software that would track personal info such as respondent’s IP address.

#### **Incentives**

If there will be a prize draw as incentive, the following or a similar paragraph should precede the personal contact information part in the survey (usually at the end of the questionnaire).

*To participate in the draw for a chance to win 1 (one) of 4 (four) \$50 gift certificates to Metrotown, please enter your name and email address below. We will use this information only to track your participation in the draw and to contact the winners to award their prize.*

## 5. Aspects and Phases of a Survey Research Project

**Committee decision** – Once the Survey Management Committee members examine the application for the criteria and issues as described in the procedure, they accordingly either accept or decline the request. In the event they decline the survey request, they will endeavor to offer alternatives, such as references to existing reports or contacting the LTC or ITS for assistance. If the Committee accepts the request, it will assist the survey sponsor as needed in preparing the survey research/project agenda. The steps in the following example mirror IR's process.

**5.1. Objectives** – Before you begin your survey, determine the key research objective(s) to be answered by the survey. From there, develop a plan for analyzing the data and reporting the results. How will you use the data you collect? With whom will your results be shared? In what format will results be shared – as visual presentations, written or electronic reports?

**5.2. Timeline** – Develop a reasonable survey project timeline (from start to finish).

A survey squeezed in a tight schedule may miss the overall objective of producing useful data.

Surveys should usually not be administered during periods of student exams, peak workloads, or during vacations or holidays.

**5.3. Charter** – For ad-hoc surveys only: Prepare a survey charter to be signed by the related department

**5.4. Base questions on objectives** – For ad-hoc surveys only: Define your research questions in light of survey objectives. This is a critical part of the survey research process. Take the time to clearly define the research questions to be addressed in the survey. Get feedback from colleagues and relevant decision-makers. Review the literature on your topic to see how questions have been framed by other researchers, institutes, or professional associations, and what related issues or themes should be considered when exploring this topic.

**5.5. Question design** – Design the survey instrument in the online survey software if you are going to conduct a web-based survey. An examples of such software is Verint (formerly Vovici), for which the data is stored in Canada.

Survey questions should be formed in a way that they can effectively and efficiently collect the targeted information. Ideas for specific survey questions can come from existing instruments, colleagues, members of the target population, and your own observations and prior knowledge. It is important to balance adequate coverage of your research questions (comprehensiveness) with conciseness. Avoid the temptation to include questions that may provide interesting but not particularly useful results.

**5.6. Select the sample** – It is not necessary to survey an entire population in order to have valid, generalizable results. A random sample will do the job while minimizing costs – including the costs of survey fatigue.

**5.7. Incentives** – You may offer respondents the chance to be entered into a draw for prizes. Gift cards, tuition, services, or personal electronic devices are common prizes. Literature on survey methodology suggests that these kinds of incentives have a modest impact, increasing the response rate slightly.

**5.8. Privacy and security** – For surveys that offer incentives to participate, respondents must provide contact information. If identifying information such as names or e-mail addresses are kept with the survey responses and confidentiality is promised to respondents, the study needs a security protocol for keeping the data safe (also see “Data Security,” further below).

For example, IR selects the prize winner by random number function in Excel the first day of the survey closure, selecting a few alternates in case the first winner can't be contacted. IR then

contacts the winner(s), then removes all relevant contact information from the data file before the analysis.

Canadian Anti-Spam Legislation (CASL) applies to surveys offering incentives. CASL applies to an electronic message if it contains any commercial element that is not exempted from the scope of the legislation. A prize draw or contest is considered “commercial activity” that is not related to core activities of BCIT. If a prize draw is included with a survey message, the entire message is considered to be a Commercial Electronic Message (CEM) subject to CASL.

All CEMs must contain the following information:

- Office/branch within BCIT that is sending the message
- Contact information for the office/branch including mailing address and telephone no. and/or email address and/or website address
- Unsubscribe option (i.e. information about how to unsubscribe from receiving future CEMs; this could be by sending an email with the request to be taken off the mailing list)

The message should include a statement indicating that personal information is being collected for the purpose of administering the draw.

Contact Cynthia Kent, Associate Director, Privacy, for additional information on CASL.

**5.9. Testing** – After a final review, pre-test the survey with colleagues and the department requesting the survey; revise it, if necessary, on the basis of their feedback regarding clarity, comprehensiveness, and length of your survey.

**5.10. Administer the survey** –

- Get the cohort and upload it onto the mailing list in the software.
- Send invitations and reminders (depending on the surveying period, 1 to 3 reminders are recommended): Make sure these are included in the survey invitation:
  - A clear email subject line
  - An explanation of data security and confidentiality measures to be used, as described in the next section (“Data security”)
  - Link to survey

**5.11. Data security** – Survey respondents need to be informed if their responses will be anonymous, kept confidential, or are entirely non-confidential.

Anonymous data do not include names, addresses, student identification numbers or any other personal information that would make it possible to associate a response with any given individual.

Data that are considered confidential contain information that may identify an individual respondent. There are considerable advantages of collecting identifiers such as the ability to do “pre and post” studies through linked data files. However, files containing personal identifiers must be stored with great attention to data security and access (e.g., completed paper survey instruments must be kept in a secure locked location/filing cabinet, while computer files and completed web-based survey instruments should be password-protected and encrypted. Data should never be stored or downloaded onto an unsecured computer).

**5.12. Analyze and report the results** – After exporting the survey data from (for example) Verint software to Excel or SPSS or other data analysis tool, the file is checked for any anomalies, and all collected data are cleaned. Text responses are checked for any obscene or abusive language as well as the apparent or potentially identifiable personal information (e.g., negative comments or connotations about the instructors or classmates). The checking/cleaning of the data is usually done by the analyst.

If the paper-based survey questionnaires are to be sent to a contracted data entry company, again, all data is cleaned beforehand, and a code sheet is prepared. After the data entry file is received back, the file is checked for any anomalies before starting the analysis.

At a minimum, most reports of survey results provide a full set of frequencies for each question. Cross-tabulations of responses across subsets of respondents are also useful (e.g., by gender, campus, school, program type, program mode, etc.), although care must be taken to protect the privacy of individuals' responses. A general rule of thumb is not to report results for categories containing five or fewer respondents, to avoid revealing potentially identifiable personal data. In the instance of masking results, a symbol (~) is used to draw the report reader's attention to this practice.

By sharing your findings widely, you can not only enlighten the Institute community about your work, but you may also be able to head-off a new and redundant data collection effort. For example, BCIT's IR publishes all its reports on the IR portal. For the surveys reported to a specific department (e.g., Library Services, Housing, or Recreation Services), it's that department's discretion to publish their results. IR cannot share a specific department's survey results with others.

Remember that survey results deemed as "research" cannot be presented or published beyond BCIT without REB approval.

**5.13. Post-survey assessment** – After completing the project entirely, the survey designer/analyst assesses the effectiveness of the survey by reviewing, for instance, response rates, questions with highest dropouts (to assess if there was something wrong with the question wording or choices, etc.), or outcomes of a new survey methodology, to shed light on the improvements of future projects. In 2015, for example, IR started to use proportionate survey sample: staff proportionated the survey cohort by program type, i.e., Trades and Technology and program mode (part-/full-time), and then stratified it by School. IR determined this new methodology reduced the sampling error and improved the representativeness of the sample.

## Related Documents

Policy XXXX, Survey Management  
Procedure XXXX-PR1, Survey Application Process

## Amendment History

1. Created 2017 MMM DD
2. Revision 1 YYYY MMM DD