Pilot Testing a Point in Time Survey

Pilot testing is a process of testing out your survey and data collection process to ensure they function before you start to collect real data. By testing it you're trying to work out any problems or kinks before you do your real data collection by getting the survey or process in front of as many people as you can.

Pilot testing is an iterative process, meaning that most likely you'll test, make revisions, and test again until the survey and/or data collection system is working reliably. Sufficient pilot testing ensures the data you are collecting will meet your needs and that your survey and data collection process are functional and sustainable for your staff and participants.

While the overall goal of pilot testing is to work out the kinks, below we've outlined some more specific goals to consider when pilot testing. Appendix A has more questions and considerations for each goal.

Goals for testing your survey:
- The order of the questions on the survey makes sense
- The order of the questions on the survey is comfortable for participants and staff
- Participants and staff understand the questions

Goals for testing your data collection process:
- Data collection process is comfortable and confidential for participants and staff
- Staff have the appropriate training and resources to administer the survey and support participants (know how to answer common questions, have appropriate referral information)
- Identify areas for staff support and ensure they have access to adequate training and resources
- Staff can easily and accurately collect data using the planned system (paper or digital)
  - *Digital data collection only,* the survey is properly programmed into the software
- Calculate time involved in data collection and assess if it is acceptable to participants and staff
  - *If giving an incentive*, is the time involved in data collection and the incentive compatible?
- Confirm the data you're collecting is analyzable to meet your goals and planned analysis

Testing Your Survey Tool and Data Collection Process

Once your survey tool is drafted, you're ready to start testing! **Conduct the tests as close to how real data collection will look as possible.** That means, if you're going to collect data on paper, test the survey on paper and have it formatted to look similar to the final version; if you're going to collect data digitally, program the survey into the software and collect data via the software; if you're having interviewers administer the survey, interviewers should administer the pilot testing survey too. You're trying to work out any and all kinks now, rather than when data collection is happening.

First, **test with 2-5 staff members**, in general more is better! Ask them to review in consideration of the goals outlined above - comfort, confidentiality, resources, etc. **Take notes during this process.** A general pilot testing notes template is in Appendix B. Appendix C includes an example of a notes template attached to your interview guide. It is **critical** your front-line staff have buy-in and feel ownership throughout this process, and pilot testing helps facilitate that. Staff involvement can help your team administer your forms accurately and consistently, which strengthens your data integrity.

As part of testing, answer every question in every possible way, and make sure the correct questions appear when they are supposed to. Check the back end of your system; do you need to reformat your data to be able to analyze it? Practice calculating the metrics you'll regularly use to make sure the data is being collected correctly.

After making appropriate revisions to the tool or the system, you can test with 2-5 participants. Continue this process until your questions and variables are reliably working. If you continue to have a question or a variable that isn't working (i.e., it isn't understood by participants, staff have to explain what you're trying to collect, etc.), consider removing it. If you press on and include a question or a variable that's not reliable, your findings may not be accurate.

Appendix A – Questions and Considerations When Developing Your Pilot Testing Plan

Goals for testing your survey:
- The questions on the survey makes sense
    - Do staff and participants understand the questions and answers on the forms/surveys as intended?
    - Are participants having trouble choosing an answer?
    - Are you using plain language?
    - Are you using an appropriate reading level?
- The order of the questions on the survey is comfortable for participants and staff
    - Does the flow of questions make sense?
    - Does the skip logic work appropriately?
        - If digital, is it programmed correctly?
        - If paper, can staff administer it properly?
    - Are the questions appropriate, given previous answers? (for example, if someone says they are living with HIV, they shouldn't get questions after that about PrEP)
- Participants and staff understand the questions
    - Do participants have follow-up in response to certain questions?
    - Do participants answer the question as expected?
    - What additional information might staff need when administering the question(s)?

Goals for testing your data collection process:
- Data collection process is comfortable and confidential for participants and staff
    - Are participants comfortable answering the questions?
    - Is there a way for participants to decline to answer a question?
    - Is there a way for staff to mark a participant declined to answer?
    - If participants have trouble reading, are staff/volunteers ready and able to help them complete forms that participants would typically complete on their own?
    - What is the space participants will take the survey in?
    - Will they be visible and/or audible to other participants or staff?
    - If you ask for potentially sensitive information, do you explain confidentiality protections and provide a private space?
- Staff have the appropriate training and resources to administer the survey and support participants (know how to answer common questions, have appropriate referral information)
    - Are staff comfortable asking the questions?
    - Can staff explain why you are collecting this data?
    - Do staff have the resources/referrals/knowledge to answer participant questions that may arise?
    - For example, if you are asking about their most recent HCV test, and participants mention they would like to get tested, are you able to do that in-house or readily provide a referral? Do staff have that information?
- Identify areas for staff support and ensure they have access to adequate training and resources
    - How do staff feel after administering surveys?
    - Do they know who to go to with questions or issues that come up during data collection?
    - Is there a place/process for them to discuss their experience?

- Staff can easily and accurately collect data using the planned system (paper or digital)
    - Are staff struggling to administer the survey?
    - Does the system function for the staff as expected, with minimal in-the-moment issues?
    - Are surveys coming back in with significant missing or incorrect data?
    - *Digital data collection only,* the survey is properly programmed into the software
        - Do the skip patterns/branching logic work correctly?
        - Is the survey programmed/formatted correctly?
- Calculate time involved in data collection and assess if it is acceptable to participants and staff
    - *If giving an incentive*, is the time involved in data collection and the incentive compatible?
    - How long does it take staff to administer the forms?
    - How long does data entry take?
    - How much does filling out the forms slow your services?
    - Does it create a long wait for participants?[1]
    - Does it create a crowded waiting room that infringes on confidentiality?
- Confirm the data you're collecting is analyzable to meet your goals and planned analysis
    - Have you collated the pilot data and tried to analyze it?
    - Can you get the metrics you want from the data you are collecting?