



Memorandum

To: Allison Paul, WHPA Online Permitting Working Group Co-Chair
From: Nick McKay and Ellen Steiner, Opinion Dynamics
Date: February 2, 2017
Re: Recommended Changes to the WHPA Jurisdictional Survey of Online Permitting Systems

1. Introduction

Opinion Dynamics conducted four cognitive interviews with building department staff to understand how respondents would react to, and understand, the questions in the WHPA jurisdictional survey of online permitting systems (OPS). Two of the four completed interviews were with building department staff who do not currently have an OPS, and two were with building department staff who do have an OPS. The results of the cognitive interviews indicated a number of potential changes to the survey that would increase survey clarity and increase the accuracy of the results of the full survey.

1.1 Recommended Changes to the Survey

Overall, respondents mentioned multiple times that the text boxes throughout the survey would limit, or seemingly encourage them to limit, the level of detail of their responses. It would be beneficial to increase the size of the text boxes throughout the survey to encourage more detailed responses.

Respondents said that it would be helpful to be told in the introduction of the survey how long it would take them to complete it; however, the time that it takes to complete the survey heavily depends on whether the respondent's jurisdiction currently has an OPS. It is recommended that the survey progress bar be removed because it does not accurately estimate the additional time required to complete the survey, in most cases reporting that the respondent has completed 50% of the survey when they are nearly finished.

Respondents were not completely comfortable with taking the survey because they did not know what we plan to do with the information that we gather. They said that they would be worried that the information may not remain completely anonymous, and may be released to the public. Respondents also questioned the overall purpose of the survey, stating that they did not understand why the State of California is so concerned about HVAC permitting.

Introduction

Respondents said that the introduction is too lengthy, or that they might perceive it as being too lengthy because it is so information-dense. Respondents suggested that certain portions of the introduction be bulleted. One respondent did not understand why the phrase "enforcement agency" was used in the introduction, and recommended that it be changed to "building department agency." Respondents suggested that the HVAC changeout definition in the introduction be bulleted as well. There was some confusion as to what constitutes a changeout, with some respondents asking whether changeouts only include a like-to-like replacement of an HVAC system, or if it could include a size change, particularly an increase in size. One

respondent recommended adding a spatial component to the changeout definition, stating that the replacement HVAC equipment should be installed “in the same location.”

Question 1 – How are historical permit records currently stored?

Respondents struggled with defining what a historical permit record means in this context, asking if it means only permits that have been assigned or also permits that have been applied for. Respondents were unclear as to whether this question was asking about all permit records, or just HVAC records. Multiple respondents stated that they frequently use laserfiche to store permit records and were not sure if it should be classified as an electronic file. It is recommended that laserfiche be added as a response option.

Question 2 – Does your jurisdiction currently have an online permitting system?

Respondents expressed uncertainty about what qualifies as an OPS, with some stating that there could be some kind of a “hybrid system” that does not contain enough features, or requires some hard-copies or an in-person application, to be considered to be a full-OPS. One respondent said that an online application portal can be considered an OPS, while another said that a system has to be able to collect permit applications and be used to issue a permit online in order to be considered an OPS. It is recommended that this question, or the survey introduction, be modified to include a definition of an OPS.

Question 3 – Which of the following online permit features does this jurisdiction currently offer?

Respondents indicated that they were not sure what was meant by the term “Users” in the answer options. Some capabilities of the OPS may be restricted for some users, such as the general public, while other users, such as contractors, may have full access to the OPS. The term “Users” could potentially mean the staff at the building department jurisdiction. One respondent suggested that the question be modified to ask “does your jurisdiction” as opposed to “does this jurisdiction.” Respondents found Question 3a. to be ambiguous, because it could be asking about permits that had previously been assigned to the user of the OPS, or it could be asking about all permits that have been assigned. Question 3b. may be ambiguous due to the phrase “certain types”, which could be modified to ask specifically about residential or non-residential permits, or be phrased as “multiple types.” Questions 3d. and 3e. may be problematic because multiple respondents said that they provide users with permit applications and fee schedules on their websites, but do not include these within their OPS, so they were unsure how they should respond to the question. It is recommended that the terms “users” and “OPS” be defined.

Question 6 – What year did the jurisdiction begin offering some form of online permitting?

One respondent found this question to be difficult because they have had an online system for many years, but was unsure when the system could have been considered to be an OPS, saying that “technically you could call it an OPS but it really wasn’t.” It is recommended that the term OPS be defined.

Question 9 – Can HVAC changeout permits be applied for using the OPS?

One respondent stated that this question would be difficult for some people to answer because some jurisdictions only offer residential or non-residential changeout permits through their OPS.

Question 10 – What other type of permits, besides HVAC changeouts, can be applied using the OPS?

One respondent said that the list of permits that can be applied for is too lengthy to be able to answer this question. Multiple respondents suggested that this question be modified to be a multiple choice question that includes broad categories, such as HVAC, mechanical, electrical, etc.

Question 11 – Has the rate of permitting changed as a result of the OPS?

Respondents were unsure of what is meant by “rate of permitting”, with some interpreting that as meaning the number of permits issued, and others interpreting that as meaning the estimated rate of compliance.

Question 12 – Has code compliance changed as a result of the OPS?

Respondents seemed to be uncomfortable with providing an answer to this question. Only one respondent provided an answer, which they said was a “complete guess.”

Question 13 - Have permit fees changed as a result of the OPS?

Respondents were unsure if this question was asking about the change in overall revenue that the jurisdiction receives from permit fees, or whether it was asking about the cost of an individual permit.

Question 14 – How has building department staff responded to the OPS?

One respondent stated that different people in the department would feel differently about the OPS, and suggested that the question ask about specific department staff, such as “permit processors” and “billing processing staff.”

Question 15 – How have users responded to the OPS?

Respondents did not know what was meant by the word “users”, which they believed could mean the building department staff, contractors, or the general public. The respondents’ answers would change based on what is meant by “users.”

Question 16 – What challenges or barriers did the building department experience in the development and implementation of the online permit system?

One respondent suggested that an option of “Not applicable” be added to this question, because they did not have any challenges with the “payment claims and processing” category because they did not attempt to include that in their OPS. One respondent suggested that the survey ask about the amount of time that it took to implement an OPS.

Question 17 – Can a user submit the HERS compliance forms with the current OPS?

One respondent said that they did not know what “HERS compliance forms” are. It is recommended that the HERS acronym be defined in this question or in question 16 where it originally appears.

Question 18a. – Would the ability to integrate with the HERS Registries be a desired feature by staff or users?

One respondent defined “staff” as meaning building department staff and defined “users” as meaning contractors. This respondent then stated that contractors really like this feature, but that staff members do not necessarily care about this feature, so it was difficult for the respondent to answer.

Question 18b. Would the ability to verify a contractor’s license from the CSLB website be a desired feature by staff or users?

One respondent said that staff consider this to be a highly desirable feature, but that contractors do not necessarily care about this feature. This led to the respondent having difficulty answering this question, similarly to the difficulty that they had in answering Question 18a.

Question 19 – How desirable would it be if the State of California was to provide a statewide “apply for permit system” that could be redirected to this jurisdiction’s website?

All respondents said that they would need more information about how the system would work in order for them to have an opinion. One respondent thought that the OPS would be a state-wide system that replaced all jurisdictional OPS, another respondent thought that the OPS would simply be software that individual jurisdictions could modify and implement themselves, and another respondent thought that the state-wide system would essentially just provide links that would direct permit seekers to individual jurisdictional websites.

Question 22 – From July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016, approximately how many changeout permits have been issued?

None of the respondents could immediately recall the number of changeout permits that were issued, and only one was willing to provide an estimate. The other respondents said that they would have to run reports to be able to provide that number and they expressed their doubts about their willingness to run those reports while taking the survey. It is recommended that this question be changed to a multiple choice question that contains a range for the number of permits issued.

Question 23 – From July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016, what percent of the changeouts were residential vs. non-residential?

Similarly to Question 22, none of the respondents could immediately recall the number of changeout permits. The respondents said that they would have to run reports to be able to provide that number and they expressed their doubts about their willingness to run those reports while taking the survey. It is recommended that this question be changed to a multiple choice question that contains a range for the number of permits issued.

Question 24 – From July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016, approximately how many changeouts, would you estimate, are installed without a permit?

None of the respondents said that they would be willing to provide an estimate for this question. One respondent described how they could potentially derive an estimate, but then said that “That’s just a shot in the dark. I don’t know if any building official would answer that.” It is recommended that this question be removed.