

FIFTH INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON BUSINESS DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

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TRANSFORMING SHORT-TERM STATISTICS: THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

Dr Kate Thorsteinsson, Dr Robert Edmunds

Office for National Statistics, UK, kate.thorsteinsson@ons.gov.uk

Organization: Office for National Statistics, UK

Abstract

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is taking forward a programme of transformation to deliver improvements to the UK's economic statistics and, of particular focus for this paper, the data collection processes underpinning their production. We will discuss research on the transformation of the short-term statistics which to date has, amongst other work, involved qualitative research with around two hundred businesses across the retail, services and construction industries. We will highlight issues that have emerged with the current survey design and latest proposals to address these. Alongside this ongoing research, we will encourage discussion on the benefits and challenges of working under an agile project framework which, while having an advantage of focus and collaboration, does not easily lend itself to qualitative research.

ONS's transformation programme goals include better integration of non-survey data sources and development of innovative statistical methods and operational approaches to build a common architecture for collection, processing and analyses. In addition, an aim is to rationalise surveys making operations more efficient, moving what are currently paper-based and telephone surveys, online. These changes will reduce the burden on businesses as well as have operational cost benefits. Transformation is part of ONS's commitment to continual improvement; ensuring user requirements for relevant and more detailed information and greater insight into economic statistics are met.

The short-term outputs are the first suite of business statistics to go through transformation. The focus has started on the 'Distributive Trade' outputs which will be produced for the retail, motor trade and wholesale industries. The transformation of construction, production and other services' short-term outputs is intended to follow. ONS is exploring using HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) Value Added Tax (VAT) data and linking this with business data held on a new statistical 'business

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spine’, the ‘Statistical Business Register (SBR)’, which would replace ONS’s current Interdepartmental Business Register (IDBR). Using VAT data has the potential to reduce the number of businesses currently sampled alongside other benefits. Variables collected via the short-term surveys would also be changed. This has an impact for businesses. We therefore gathered businesses’ perspectives on issues such as:

- whether or not the proposed changes were feasible
- how their own accounting practices relating to turnover (for example, work-in-progress (WIP), subcontracting and long-term contracts) could affect the data provided
- the burden involved to provide the current and proposed data
- whether they could provide data at the UK ‘enterprise’ rather than ‘reporting unit’ level

A new, electronic questionnaire was iteratively tested using cognitive testing and user research methods. Research is ongoing, but the aim is to introduce a new, online ‘Monthly Turnover Survey’ (MTS). Data collected via the MTS will be used in conjunction with improved methods to reduce burden on businesses and improve the quality of the short-term outputs.



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