THE RESPONSE PROCESS IN LARGE BUSINESSES

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In close collaboration with the Dutch Central Bank, Statistics Netherlands is redesigning the Quarterly Survey on Finances of Enterprises. The target population consists of the 350 largest non-financial enterprises in the Netherlands. In 2014, a new set of required data has been developed (the conceptual data model). This data model is very complex and requests for a lot of detailed information. As a consequence, the response process within businesses could be quite complicated and burdensome, even though the goal of this redesign was to reduce response burden.

As input for the questionnaire a feasibility study was conducted in 2015, studying the internal response process in these businesses. Research questions included:

1. What (data): What data do we get? Are the concepts clear and do they match or differ with accounting definitions?
2. Who (units): What entities in the enterprise are involved in the response process?
3. Where (people and sources): what business staffs is involved in the response process and where can the requested information be retrieved?
4. When (time): When is the requested information available?
5. How (questionnaire): What would be the best way to collect the required information?

This study resulted in a number of requirements which served as input for the questionnaire design, in order to tailor the questionnaire to the response (or reporting) process. One of these results is that the internal response process depends on the structure of the business administration. This process can be very complex, involving many respondents/data providers and data sources at various locations.

In the spring of 2018 the questionnaire development was almost finalised and a workable version was put available for the businesses to prepare themselves. A small number of businesses were visited to study whether they could work with the new questionnaire. The conclusion was that the questionnaire by itself works well, and doesn't seem to be an issue; a major concern however was the reporting process: getting everyone needed involved in this process and setting up a new reporting process. This comes down to the following three-step plan for businesses:

1. Getting an overview of the requested data, where the data reside and who is involved. This includes checking: a. the consolidation cluster, b. variable definitions, c. periodicity of the data
2. Getting everyone involved and discussing a new integrated reporting process
3. Implementing the new integrated reporting process.

These findings may have consequences for a fundamental methodological question: How to pre-test business survey questionnaires?' A simple cognitive in-depth interview may not be sufficient, as this mainly focusses on step 1 in the Tourangeau survey response model (Snijkers et al., 2013): comprehension. My hypothesis is that for complex reporting processes getting a good understanding of step 2, the retrieval process, is of more importance. Also starting a pre-test study when a draft of the questionnaire is ready would come too late for tailoring the questionnaire to the response process. In the presentation I will briefly show what the new questionnaire looks like (see videos on www.cbs.nl/balanceofpayments), but for the main part I will discuss the complex response process for retrieving the requested data, and its consequences for pre-testing.

References:

Snijkers, G., G. Haraldsen, J., Jones, and D.K. Willimack, 2013, Designing and Conducting Business Surveys, Wiley, Hoboken.