Comment

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Don Dillman's article is an insightful description of observations he garnered while working closely with federal government survey designers, particularly at the U.S. Bureau of the Census. He makes a case for the difficulty of innovation for large surveys in large organizations, which he attributes to two major factors: the co-existence and competition between the "operations" and "research" cultures, and cumbersome organizational structures. He further suggests four steps to addressing the barriers to innovation.

Dillman's analysis and suggestions are clearly predicated on the primacy of measurement and nonresponse error considerations. Three of the four steps are ways to increase the attention these are paid. Presumably the key to innovation is to better measure and understand errors made by respondents, interviewers, and their interaction with each other, survey instruments and technology. Further, these are posited as in conflict with requirements that allow for economically sound production and processing operations. But this need not be the case. Just as postal regulations, control procedures and the like must not dictate the task confronting the respondent, neither need they be sacrificed to obtain information to indict their consideration. Another way of thinking about this is that government surveys must respect not only the respondent whose time and effort the agency solicits, but also the general public whose dollars fund the whole enterprise. A business case can be made for all of these considerations – research and operations.

Decisions to employ innovation in survey design and conduct need not devalue any of these considerations. Determining the best survey forms and procedures ideally involves respectful and knowledgeable interplay among all of them. Stating hypotheses, interpreting results, and suggesting solutions need not be the sole domain of the researcher. Placement of processing information, handling printing and mailing requirements, and timing and cost considerations need not fall only on the "operations" expert. The best solutions will come about when all these factors are vented under the "umbrella of shared purpose" as suggested by Dillman in his fourth proposed step toward solution – dealing effectively with organizational structure. He has chosen to use the word "hierarchy" as the major aspect of organizations that inhibit innovation. Problems of communication, delay, cultural separation, and inappropriate seats of decision-making are attributed to the hierarchy. Instead, one might think of those problems – and also the key to the solution – to be based on *management practices*, as distinguished from the impersonal hierarchy. Managers and supervisors get what they reward. If they reward dependence on them to make or

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"okay" decisions; if they avoid risk; and if they expect staff to represent solely the interests of their "culture" – be it operations, research, or something else – that is the way the intelligent staff person will act. Reducing layers of hierarchy, for instance, through matrix management, will not change behavior unless new incentives are introduced. Instead, managers need to define an organization that will support inter-dependent decision-making, provide incentives to collect good information to make the best possible decisions, and set clear expectations for innovation.

Will this happen? It has begun to happen, at least at the Bureau of the Census. For many reasons, both imposed and self-generated, serious efforts to redefine the role of management, base decisions on real information, and empower self-directed teams are underway. How long this will take, and the degree to which it addresses the specific concerns about measurement and nonresponse error Dillman describes, is not known. But these efforts bring us much closer to seeing the "operations" and "research" culture mesh, where individuals identify themselves less with one of these cultures than with common interests and shared knowledge to serve the public responsibly in an environment where innovation may be needed for survival.