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Comment

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Don Dillman has written a very interesting article in which he attempts to analyse the difficulties of effecting innovation in government survey organizations. Much of what he writes will be recognized by those working in national statistical agencies around the world. However, the article also describes aspects that seem to be specific for the situation in the U.S.A. I would like to point out some differences that exist between the U.S. Bureau of the Census and other national statistical agencies, particularly Statistics Netherlands. Such a comparison might provide guidance in improving the situation, both in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. My remarks are based on Dillman's article and my personal experiences with the Census Bureau and other statistical offices internationally.

First, I feel it fitting to change the title of the paper to "Why Is Innovation Difficult in U.S. Government Surveys?" There are at least three important aspects in which the Census Bureau differs from other national statistical agencies, Statistics Netherlands being one of them.

Organisationally, the U.S. system is different in that it is highly decentralised. Statistical data collection is dispersed through many different government organisations. This makes it almost impossible to concentrate knowledge and experience on survey processing in one place. Particularly when several agencies are involved, it is hard to get general consent on proposed plans for change, and it is probably even harder to implement such plans.

The second aspect is that the Census Bureau carries out surveys for other government agencies, like the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The contracting agencies seem to have a say in the way these surveys are conducted. So, the Census Bureau is not independent in choosing the survey instruments for particular survey operations. In my view, survey sponsors should not bother about the nitty gritty details of the survey, but focus on the quality and the costs of the final output.

The third aspect concerns top management. The Director of the Census Bureau is a political appointment by the current administration. Changes in the political climate have consequences for the management of the Census Bureau. A change in political power can lead to the appointment of a new director. This makes it difficult to develop and implement long range innovation programs. Experience has shown that the active support of top management is vital for the success of such programs.

In contrast to the Census Bureau, a statistical agency like Statistics Netherlands

[1] Statistics Netherlands. The views expressed are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the policies of Statistics Netherlands.

represents a highly centralised statistical system. Statistics Netherlands conducts all of the data collection for government surveys making certain types of innovation easier to implement.

The following factors have been important prerequisites for the changes that have occurred at Statistics Netherlands:

* A strong management willing to initiate and support change in the organisation. Here, the bottom-up approach will not work. If top management refuses to back up people implementing innovations, or if it is not aware of such attempts, employees will not believe change is important. In this respect, a hierarchical organisation has advantages.
* Do not force people to change. Only if they are convinced the change will lead to improvements will they support the change. Provide staff with sufficient information and emphasise the advantages. Let staff draw their own conclusions. The incentive for change should come from within and not from without.

Although the climate for change at Statistics Netherlands seems in some respects to be better than at the Census Bureau, many problems are also experienced. These problems bear a remarkable similarity to the problems Dillman discusses. I would like to make some comments on Dillman's analysis of why employees in government agencies are so reluctant to change.

* Indeed, there is a difference between operations and research departments. The employees in operations have a clear target: the production of a continuous series of high quality, consistent statistics. Once they have a smoothly running system, they see no reason to change it. Change leads to extra work, and statistics produced in a different way may prove inconsistent with previous time series.
* Employees in statistical production are trained to keep existing systems running. They are not trained to think about redesigning their processes, and they also lack the methodological knowledge to undertake such redesign.
* Employees in production may also fear change. Change usually leads to more automation and less manual work. Therefore, innovation may lead to different work, or no work at all.

With respect to the different kinds of survey errors discussed, I would like to draw a clear contrast between sampling error and other errors. I do not see sampling error as a problem. Sampling error is introduced by the survey designer. This is "man-made randomization." The survey designer is in control of this source of randomness. Therefore, this is not an interesting problem. The other sources of error are far more serious. We have only vague knowledge about the mechanisms causing these errors and cannot measure their effects. I do not believe that cognitive psychology, or any other science, will provide solutions for these problems. Useful models for psychological or social phenomenae with sufficient explanatory power simply do not exist.

A good example is non-response. Years of research have not resulted in the ultimate solution. In many countries, the average level of non-response has even increased, thus exacerbating the problems. Remedial action for non-response should

focus on increasing the co-operation of information suppliers, not on developing models to adjust for possible effects of non-response. Non-response research has shown that co-operation is determined by a multitude of aspects, like topic of the survey, mode of the survey, color of the envelope of the announcement letter, time of year, training of interviewers, behaviour of interviewers, etc. Expert knowledge in many fields is required to improve response rates, and to increase the quality of the information collected.

Finally, a remark about training. Dillman seems to suggest that it is the research specialists who are the natural engine behind innovation. I would like to make a plea for generalists. If you want to improve survey processes, you need expertise in several different fields, for example, statistical methodology, information technology, subject-matter knowledge, human computer interaction, and marketing. If you collect specialists from all these fields in "case-teams," you have a vast variety of specialists engendering a lot of communication problems. The fewer people you need, the better! So train your experts to be generalists. Unfortunately, the educational systems in many countries do not provide for such training. Therefore, in-house training is required.

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