Comment

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I found Dillman's analysis of the barriers to innovation in government survey organizations most interesting, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to offer some of my own thoughts on this topic. Dillman's major theme focuses on organizational aspects that appear to lead naturally to the slowing down of the implementation of good research initiatives and results. A secondary theme demonstrates this in the particular case of dealing with measurement and nonresponse errors. The proposed solutions concentrate on this secondary theme; however, the solutions could be extended to the greater issue of ensuring the implementation of research successes in general.

I should mention that my own perspective on this topic is based on my experience since the early 1970s in the Survey Methods Divisions at Statistics Canada, at the working and managerial levels. For a number of years, as manager of the Survey Methods Research Program, I have often given some thought to the general issues raised here by Dillman. Whereas I am in agreement with much of what Dillman has observed, I am not convinced that what he claims to be consequences of the current organizational structure are necessarily so. I believe that any organizational structure will have many imperfections, and that it is important to actively pursue ways to overcome these imperfections without introducing new ones that are even more detrimental to the organization.

For example, Dillman states that in a hierarchical organization, horizontal communication is actually discouraged! This definitely does not have to be the case. Horizontal communication may be more difficult, but it is certainly not necessarily discouraged. I have found that it is often more a problem of sending and receiving too much information, so that communication is impeded because the receiver does not have the time to digest and react to some of the more important messages received.

Organizational Cultures

Dillman often refers to two cultures – research and operations. I am not exactly sure what he means by the operations group. Most of his references are with respect to the development of the survey collection vehicles and the conduct of data collection and capture tasks. There are, however, at least two other major players involved. The subject matter specialists, including the users and analysts, comprise one of these. The other important players are the information technology specialists. In today's

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complex world, where detailed specialized knowledge can be obtained only from different experts in various fields, all these key staff depend on each other to ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively.

If we extend Dillman's arguments to the problems of dealing with four major cultures, rather than just two, we see that effective management is both complex and challenging. I believe that these separate cultures are, in fact, necessary. The challenge is bringing together the many perspectives, in such a way that the real goals of the survey are achieved. This is for the short-term goals of implementing a particular survey, and I believe this is the reason for the current organizational structure, with its multi-disciplinary project team approach.

However, a secondary objective for large survey organizations is the long term goal of researching and developing new ways to conduct surveys. This is the objective that is central to Dillman's article. Although I call it a secondary objective, Dillman is correct when he states that it is an essential component of the organization's function. The question, in my mind, is not how the research and operations cultures must change, but rather how the long term "research" objectives can be accommodated within an organization whose focus tends to be on the short term requirements.

There are a number of ways to facilitate this. Firstly, it is necessary to have a spokesperson at the most senior layer of the organization who can represent the perspective of the long term requirements and the need to have an active research program.

Management must encourage active participation of the operations or subject matter groups in the research program. In this way the research will tend to focus on the needs that are truly relevant. As well, if the areas that will eventually use the results of the research accomplishments participate in the research project itself, they are more likely to accept the results of the research and follow through with implementation.

In my opinion, the methodology function should be centralized within the agency. This function should include both the service and the research function. The research program should be conducted by persons who also work on the service function. This can facilitate the adoption of the research program within the ongoing program. As well, by conducting the research, certain insights can be gained into the subtleties of the reasons for using certain methods, and these methods can then be questioned and improved upon more easily. Since researchers often like to work in isolation, by being part of an organization with responsibility for the short-term needs, they get a chance to be exposed to the day-to-day problems.

I agree with Dillman's second recommendation that states the need to build a research capacity into the operations area. The advent of computer assisted interviewing will make this easier to accomplish, since the collection and capture stages will be easier to track. One of the problems with implementing this recommendation is associated with how the resources are set for the operations areas. Generally, these resources may be based on the requirements of individual projects, and there is no excess capacity built in for long term goals. Such a research capacity must come from funds administered by the agency, rather than being project-based. There are a number of ways to accomplish this, but I will not go into detail here.

An issue that I have not addressed is determining the appropriate level of resources for methods research in a statistical agency. This is a complex issue for which there are no easy answers. However, these decisions should be consciously made by the most senior layer of management in the organization, so that all the complexities can be brought to bear on the decision. In my mind, depending on how research is defined in the organization, I believe that the research function should be between 10% and 35% of the methodology service function. I am assuming that the methodology service function is also at the right level. Many organizations do not have such a function easily defined and identified, even though the tasks are conducted, at least implicitly.

Changes in the Research Culture

I agree that the core value systems of the research culture and the operations culture may be very different. However, when approached from the point of view of the quality of the ultimate product, these differences can co-exist in a healthy manner.

Dillman focuses on many of the cultural changes to the organization that, he suggests, are needed to recognize better the benefits of the research objectives and accomplishments. However, there are also changes needed to the research culture to ensure that their perspective is in line with the goals of the organization. Researchers are difficult to manage, because the milestones are not always clear cut. It appears to outsiders that researchers tend not to pay as much attention to timeliness issues. This can be alleviated through the use of deadlines for reports, regular progress reviews, peer reviews, and so on. It also appears that too often the researchers create research problems to study a problem that could be looked at more directly, and more quickly without the research focus. This will always be a criticism of the research community, since they often look for long term improvements. However, the researchers must be aware of the short term needs, and ensure that these objectives are also met. This is where participation by the operations staff in the research program can help.

For many research endeavours, the success cannot be guaranteed in advance. The highest risk projects can have major effect if successful, but often will fail. This is counter to the operations culture, where each task is planned to ensure success. It is, therefore, important for the research group to review regularly the past accomplishments with the nonresearch community and to ask for input on the current program.

Dillman suggests that the organization should include more professionals with training in theories relevant to defining, identifying and resolving measurement and nonresponse error issues. I agree with this, in principle, but we must ensure that their advice is relevant and will be heeded. I feel that among the many concerns of a survey organization, issues of measurement error will often be low in priority, especially when resources are scarce. (This is why the organization must consciously and explicitly decide on the appropriate level of funding for long term goals.) For the time being, expenditures on issues of measurement error would remain modest, but should certainly be greater than zero.

I agree that the multi-disciplinary nature of survey errors must be better recognized, and that we need better training in these areas. This would lead to a more capable generalist professional staff. However, there is a downside to this. The specialists who have expertise in certain areas have a very important role. We would be worse off if all the specialists were replaced by generalists, because often it is the specialists who can focus on those aspects where improvements can have a major effect.

Summary

In summary, I would like to emphasize that the issues that Dillman addresses are quite complex. This does not imply that we should avoid them, but rather take up the challenge to overcome the current deficiencies. Every survey organization is different, but they all have common problems. This seems to imply that organizational change is not the complete answer. It is important for the organization to be aware of its goal and to communicate its vision effectively. Both long term and short term goals must be clearly stated and appropriately funded. I believe that innovation can be more easily facilitated under these conditions. But the changes may be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.