

Keeping Up Appearances: Maintaining standards during strategic changes in electronic reporting

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Introduction

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has successfully used mail-out paper forms for business surveys and interviews for household surveys for many years. Most of our surveys are compulsory, but co-operation is emphasised in our communication with respondents rather than compulsion. Our response rates are generally in the mid 80 to high 90 percent range, and the data collection process is largely standardised and has been highly effective without much need for electronic reporting. During the period I will discuss in this paper, this has begun to change. There have been external Government pressures, two major organisational restructures, and increasing financial difficulties for the ABS.

My own area in Methodology and Data Management Division, Data Collection Methodology (DCM) section, has remained roughly the same in terms of our role, which comes down to ensuring data quality through respondent engagement and testing. DCM is the centre of expertise in questionnaire development and evaluation, responsible for the design standards for all types of data collection instrument, and providing support to all survey developers in the ABS. However, our role is largely advisory and we do not have the authority to enforce our standards. The changes around us have made our role challenging, and this paper covers some of the strategies we have employed to ensure electronic reporting development continues to be done well.

The interim things in life are often the best: Excel forms (1999-now)

The Australian Electronic Transactions Act (ETA) 1999 required the ABS and other Australian Government departments to accommodate businesses and individuals who insisted on reporting electronically. For ABS business surveys, the Microsoft spreadsheet product Excel was considered the most cost effective and viable option in the short-term due to the high use of this application by the population. It

was intended to be used as the 'ETA fallback' electronic data collection vehicle while development work continued for other electronic forms. Excel forms had already been in use for some ABS surveys, however a standard design had not yet been developed.

At the time, business survey data collection was decentralised, with each survey area constructing and despatching their own paper forms. These were, however, designed based on our Forms Design Standards as ABS policy required survey developers to use these. A centralised approval process which included review by DCM ensured this was the case. It was therefore a natural progression for us to lead the development of Excel form standards so that the new requirement to provide electronic forms would be done in a way which maintained data quality for each collection as well as being consistent across all our collections.

Although Excel use was common for our respondents, for our internal processes the ABS used a different spreadsheet product. Programmers with Excel expertise had to be employed specifically for this project, to build a variety of test forms and then templates. A new unit was established in the business survey division to support the project, with a largely administrative role. For the only time during electronic form development at the ABS, the programmers reported directly to the methodologists. Resources were very limited and our primary aim was simply to make something that worked while being as cheap and easy to produce as possible for an electronic option.

Costs of usability testing were kept to a minimum by conducting this testing in-house, using volunteer staff as test subjects with business data scenarios. This process also helped to raise awareness of the research within the ABS, which subsequently increased commitment to the later standards. A long-running quarterly survey collecting standard accounting items was converted from paper to Excel as the basis for the tests. This survey was run by one of our regional offices, so that the central office staff completing the Excel version had not been involved in working on that particular survey before, and therefore freely criticised the content as well as making comments on format. The form was designed to look very similar to the standard paper form with a few exceptions, including instructions explaining how to navigate, save and submit the form, and noting that only the white answer fields could be edited.

The first round of testing used an experimental design to compare four different navigation methods (scrolling, spreadsheet tabs, buttons and hyperlinks) to measure actual performance and to test participant preferences. The second round confirmed that our final design, using tabs, automatic totals and further instructions, worked effectively. The Excel form design standards, along with our other standards, are available on the ABS website.

Implementation of the Excel forms standards across specific surveys allowed for ongoing testing with real respondents. Feedback on the Excel forms and the web-based lodgement procedures has always been very positive, and the more complex forms include such functionality as drop-down lists, ability to add

rows to tables, and some edits. These design complexities extend far beyond the original plans for use of Excel as a simple way to represent our paper forms electronically. In addition to the use of standards and testing, this has worked due to limiting their use to on-going respondents who directly request the mode, and building a quite close relationship with them. The Excel forms are still quite expensive to produce and process in comparison to paper form production and processing, so the ABS does not normally initiate an offer of this mode at despatch or during follow-up. However, the full difficulty and expense involved in other types of electronic data collection was yet to be realised.

The EDR (electronic data reporting) project plus Census 2001- 2006

After the initial rush to fulfil our legal obligations, the ABS wanted to approach electronic reporting more strategically. In fact, everything we did around data collection for business surveys was under review. A major organisational restructure began implementation in 2002. The form construction and despatch functions across all business surveys was centralised and respondent follow-up and other functions gradually followed. A Technology Management Unit (TMU) was created in the new branch to manage the systems side of data collection including electronic reporting. Among other outcomes, the restructure was intended to achieve improved data quality, improved respondent relations, improved reporting mechanisms and reduced respondent load.

As part of this new strategic outlook, a range of papers were presented to the highest level ABS meeting for business survey governance in January 2003. From DCM came the proposed framework of principles and techniques we dubbed Total Approach Management (TAM), extolling the virtue of a consistent design and message across all interactions with respondents and urging survey areas to improve quality and respondent engagement through better collection management. This of course included use of our design and evaluation standards. Presented at a time when the new centralised data collection branch was still forming its identity, our paper made a significant positive impact on the mind set of those staff and the whole ABS. Followed up with extensive support and relationship building with the new sections, we reaffirmed our role as the leaders in data collection method development standards.

Also endorsed at that meeting was a paper from the TMU specifically about electronic data reporting and the drivers for progressing this. A key issue emphasised in this paper was the need to provide a greater range of options for respondents to report with and being sensitive to the different preferences different groups of respondents would have, including small versus large businesses. Making respondent choice an ABS priority and acknowledging the relationship between respondent engagement and data quality was a fundamental achievement of this high level discussion. Maintaining this perspective throughout the development of electronic forms has been one of the main aims of DCM - emphasising that respondent

cooperation was essential and could not be assumed, and that the experience of using our forms should be positive regardless of technical competence.

Unfortunately there was still little funding for development and very little actual progress in building internet forms for business surveys was made during this period. At the very beginning, while Excel form development was going on, two quite different web forms were built and tested with respondents. The first one was a HTML survey on business expectations, which included complex rating-scale matrices but was otherwise short and simple, acceptable for the non-resumable technology we had at the time. Testing determined a range of useful findings including that radio buttons were preferred to drop-down scales, and that being able to print the completed form was highly desirable. Development was going well until it was announced that the survey itself was going to be cancelled. The other form was for a survey of Internet service providers. An obviously tech-savvy group, they had high (but somewhat variable) expectations for functionality in the web form tested. For example, a navigation tree-structure worked quite well here. Licensing issues with the software (Jetform's FormFlow99) and ongoing difficulty with security requirements stalled the development. These respondents were to wait another ten years for their promised web form. Investigations on the software and security angles continued throughout this period, however the TMU section was disbanded.

In the meantime, separate from all this discussion on business forms, the ABS Population Census was the first ABS collection to successfully go online. A very basic non-resumable Domino form was produced in response to the ETA for the 2001 Census, which was not advertised and was only completed by a very small number of people, mostly ABS employees. This was developed in-house and some usability testing was done for this by a specialised usability team belonging to the Technical services division and DCM staff assisted with this testing. By the 2006 Census however, the usability section had been disbanded, and constructing and hosting the new web form and related infrastructure was outsourced to IBM. A primary reason for outsourcing was to ensure infrastructure capability for a collection of this size, including essential data security, and especially under the pressure of the massive server load of internet transactions on Census night. Information lodged through the system was protected by strong data encryption and by a series of firewalls and other security hardware once it was received by the ABS.

Much of the usability testing of the application and testing of the system was also outsourced, to a range of third parties, so DCM could not be directly involved. We therefore faced a challenge to remain relevant and maintain influence over the design of ABS online questionnaires. Being part of Methodology division, which has an overall role in identifying statistical risk as well as an ongoing role in supporting the mathematical side of the Census, helped us to maintain our involvement. Modal bias was a significant concern in the statistical risk space, while not being well understood across the ABS, so our advice and support on this issue was valued enough to get us a place in the tender process which IBM won.

One major issue regarding modal differences in the Population Census form was the question format. The paper form is a multi-page matrix, where the completion order may be either by question or by person as the respondents wish. The web form needed to go one way or the other, and a by person format was chosen.

Our overall strategy in terms of modal bias has always been to ensure conceptual equivalence of data items, rather than keeping questions exactly the same across modes. This however remains a quite difficult line to tread. There are often strong tensions between wanting to reduce the risk of changes in the data and wanting to reduce the burden on respondents through additional instructions and functionality, and between getting on with a "no bells and whistles" solution which costs less initially and adding field restrictions and edits which can save processing costs in the longer term.

The 2006 Census e-form had a take-up rate of 9 percent. The outcome was viewed a great success, but the cost was also very high and was not justifiable for the much smaller business surveys which were candidates for this mode at the time.

MMDC (Multi-modal Data Collection) project 2006-2008

In the hope of gaining more financial support, the EDR project was abandoned around 2006 in favour of a more overarching strategy to cover a multi-modal perspective. A new section was again formed to manage the running of this project and the input of a now large number of stakeholders, building up to a new bid for funding from the Department of Finance. By this time, following many minor restructures and staff turnover, DCM were virtually the only staff left in the ABS with both responsibility and experience in developing electronic forms and our role in the process was assured. The period was one of positive collaboration and our team made progress on a range of standards, including updating the Excel form standards, developing standards for email contact with respondents and progressing a Suitability Model for a range of modes.

However, with such a broad focus for this project, there was effort on a wide range of sub-projects unrelated to electronic reporting. While most of these had value in themselves, others achieved little. For example, a great deal of effort amongst the stakeholders was expended on solving the efficiency problems caused by respondents using fax to return their survey forms, a problem which may not remain when web forms are available. Developing standards for web reporting and progressing actual development of forms was put off while technical services continued to investigate software options and waited for funding. One major achievement during the period was that the ABS finally began to measure the demand from respondents, with the implementation of a flag in our provider management system to record whenever a respondent mentioned a desire for electronic reporting during telephone contact. This demand is increasing, however awareness of the ETA has remained low.

Around this time the ABS also began to increase its strategic focus on client engagement and enhancement of our website. When a senior ABS decision required most of our products be provided free on the web rather than charged for, more effort was required to understand what our audience was looking for. An increasing number of feedback surveys were therefore developed, which were attached to specific publications or simply popped up while users browsed through our pages. These were web forms- but without the security requirements of statistical collections. They could be hosted on an external website and required no passwords. They had small, distributed take up so load wasn't an issue. They were therefore cheap. Helping with the wording, software selection and then screen design of these forms allowed DCM to continue developing their knowledge of the mode.

In the middle of this period, the ABS underwent another major restructure which resulted in business and household data collection branches being joined, and support for household survey questionnaire development was officially centralised in DCM along with the business survey and other survey support we had before. This not only consolidated all support for all data collection in the ABS, but brought us responsibility for training in these areas (specifically questionnaire design and cognitive interviewing). The ABS has a centralised training management area who could have taken on this responsibility and staffing and succession planning for the presenters is difficult. Nevertheless, DCM decided to retain ownership of the courses in DCM because demonstrating our expertise and helpfulness to course attendees in this way helps our general engagement with clients. Retaining this responsibility for capability development also cemented our future role in teaching others to conduct usability testing.

Standard Business Reporting (SBR) and follow up 2007-2010

The MMDC project was closed down due to a competing whole-of-government project called "standard business reporting" (SBR). Following similar processes going on in the Netherlands, the Australian SBR program aimed to implement a number of cross-agency initiatives to reduce the compliance burden experienced by business in duplicative reporting to government. The three main goals were 1) reducing the number of agencies businesses had to report the same data items to, 2) reducing the number of items needed to be reported through harmonisation of data definitions, and 3) providing options for increased automation of business reporting, including greater pre-population of forms. The last goal was where DCM got involved, and this was the first time that emphasis on reducing respondent burden was a major consideration in ABS electronic reporting development. The idea was to use standard accounting software to assemble the data of interest and send it to each agency without the respondent having to compile each report separately.

The business case argued that the savings to the community from the SBR program would be much higher than the development cost. At last there was substantial funding for the ABS to work on web data collection related issues, which were for the benefit of all the agencies involved. While this particular

development of electronic reporting was quite restricted in its application, DCM was able to spend resources on general research into screen design and usability as well as thinking on modal bias prevention and reduction to inform the project. This research included investigating what other agencies around the world were doing on web forms and modal bias, and was wide-ranging enough to be highly useful for other work apart from and beyond the SBR project. One issue in this area is that what is very common and even recommended for a general web site, may be inappropriate, even damaging, for a web form. We've had little trouble establishing that big dancing graphics and similar should not be included in our web forms. A bigger challenge has been demonstrating later in our work that more subtle things like "back to top" links are confusing and unnecessary in a web form.

It was desirable from the SBR project management's perspective to conform to best practice in electronic reporting. Respondents participating in SBR were intended to press a button to produce a pre-populated form, extracting data from their systems. Respondents would confirm this extracted data and add any extra information we may need to ask, such as future intentions for the business. DCM therefore drafted standards from our research for this form. These standards included details on question wording and language to inform the external audience on these issues, which was an excellent opportunity to highlight these to internal stakeholders as well. For example, the requirement that response categories are exhaustive and mutually exclusive applies to all our forms, but is especially important for electronic forms where respondents can't leave the question blank and can't scribble in an answer that doesn't quite fit as they could with their paper form. Our standards also emphasised the importance of ABS branding on ABS data collection interfaces to clearly distinguish these from the other obligations respondents would complete via the same SBR process. Other areas in the ABS worked on the development of the interface (using X-forms) and it was expected that our area would review these developments and ultimately conduct usability testing to validate the standards as well as testing the instrument itself.

A prototype of the same quarterly business survey used in the first Excel form tests was developed for review, however, the testing was never to eventuate as part of the SBR project. Unfortunately, as the project progressed, it became clear that the web services which respondents would use to report data were going to be managed outside the ABS. The secrecy provisions of the Census and Statistics Act 1905 by which the ABS functions were seen to forbid us to allow ABS unit record data to be handled by a third party in the way SBR would operate. Even if security measures were able to prevent inappropriate access to the data, the risk to respondent *perception* and therefore trust in the ABS was seen as too high. The ABS therefore officially withdrew from this part of the project at the end of 2008, although involvement in the conceptual work around data item definitions and some other work continued. In July 2010 the reporting system went into production for the other agencies involved, including the Taxation office, however take-up from the business community so far has been low. Nevertheless, an ABS prototype form and draft standards existed so the ABS decided to pursue using these separate from the SBR project.

Web reporting pilot project 2009- now: Part 1

The business case for web reporting which included the proposal to adapt the SBR development work already done represented the first emphasis in this area on productivity savings for the ABS. The five-yearly Agricultural Census was coming up in 2011, and with a 24 page mail-out form and a respondent population of about 160,000, a reasonable return on investment in terms of saved return postage and processing costs was expected if web take-up went well. Smaller pilots were developed first for three different business surveys to investigate a range of issues and build up to a 'load' on the ABS system in dealing with enough respondents reporting electronically to demonstrate that a collection the size of the Agricultural Census could be handled. The surveys were chosen based on their large sample sizes so absolute take-up and thus savings could be high, shortness and stability of content which reduced redevelopment requirements, and survey frequency so experience could be built on quickly.

First was the quarterly business survey which already had a prototype. It would be offered to a small number of pre-recruited businesses. The form was quite simple and created to look very similar to its paper and Excel equivalents. It was one scrolling page without sequencing or edits, but was able to print and between testing rounds automatic totals and comma masks in numerical fields were added. In usability testing with staff and respondents the form itself went quite well, however security was again an obstacle.

The project goals were to achieve "excellent security, very good provider experience and acceptable ABS experience" in this initial phase. Internal and external advice on security resulted in a complex password process for respondents to log into their form. Respondents were required to change their password upon logging in, and had a lot of difficulty meeting the requirements. Extensive instructions were needed on this screen. When putting these authentication requirements into a letter, respondents also had difficulty figuring out what their details really said e.g. entering the URL incorrectly and not being sure if the "O" in the middle of their identifier was a zero or the letter o. Using the font 'consolas', which puts a line through zeros, to print the identifier addressed this problem somewhat but it continued to affect some respondents including for the later surveys. The form was released for December quarter 2009 and offered to 47 respondents who had expressed interest in web reporting.

At last the ABS had a business web form in production. To investigate how it was received by respondents when using it live, DCM developed a post-enumeration telephone survey with separate follow-up questions for respondents who did submit online, for those who logged in but didn't submit by web, and those who did not try to access the web form. As this respondent group was so small (only 18 successfully submitted by web) all the target respondents were approached for their feedback. The respondents who completed the web form were very positive about it even when they had struggled to access it. Most of the other respondents had not noticed the offer in the cover letter at all. Many respondents also expected

communication about the web form to be by email, which would resolve many of the log-in problems but was not possible to do securely yet. No major changes were required for the actual interface from the respondent's perspective, although the lack of field restrictions in the form so that responses which were the wrong type could be submitted (e.g. alpha rather than numerical) caused problems when processing the data.

The second survey to have a web form developed was a quarterly survey of the tourism accommodation industry. To measure the letter of offer and subsequent take-up more accurately, these respondents were not warned beforehand. The offer went out at the same time as the other two web forms, for December 2009. Take-up was about 10 percent and again a post-enumeration survey was conducted, this time on a sample of each respondent group. The vast majority of respondents interviewed had not been aware of the web offer at all, many claiming they had not seen the cover letter. This led to our strong recommendation that a mention of the offer be made on the paper form itself when we next approached the whole respondent group for a survey. This is the approach used in our Population Census. There was some discussion about using separate form-types, label-file overprinting or stickers on the web-offer paper forms but cost was too restrictive. An error analysis was also performed on the submitted tourism web forms, the main (but minor) issue being missing data which was consistent with the completion of the equivalent paper forms.

The final initial pilot survey was the collection from Internet Service providers, the same survey which had been a candidate for web form development ten years before. For this survey, no paper form was included in the offer which went to the whole population. It was assumed that this group would be very willing to use a web form and so other modes were only available on request. Despatch and evaluation went fine with respondents very positive, however, it was with later versions of this form that problems with the system began to appear. The survey owners wanted to move from a scrolling form to a version with separate pages, so that a sequencing filter question could be added at the beginning. Further development of the form in 2010 to allow this led to a few mysterious but severe technical problems. Respondents also found the sequencing confusing and this version was not able to be made to print the whole form. This design was abandoned and the original scrolling form maintained.

These three surveys continue in the field for the respondents who initially took up the offer. No further offers have been made to new respondents and little further development has been possible for the forms which still have some issues. A web version of the Agricultural survey to be conducted in 2010 was developed, with the plan to offer it to a proportion of the live sample as a field test for the Census the following year. Scrolling was not suitable for this form because of its much greater length compared to the others, so the form was presented in sections. Automatic sequencing was also implemented so that respondents could skip ahead when they wanted to, using hyperlinks.

Initial usability testing demonstrated the password difficulty continued with this group, who tended to come up with passwords based on obvious things like the name of the property and then write it onto the

cover letter, effectively removing the security which the log in process was intended to ensure. The development of the form itself was coming along well, however respondents in more remote areas were getting errors of unknown origin causing the forms to crash and lose their data, similar to the Internet service provider survey. Further testing of this issue suggested the problem was related to the number of automatic transactions the sectioned web forms made while being completed, as well as possibly the type of Internet connection being used, however the cause could not be isolated and fixed in time for the field test that had been planned. The test was called off and the decision was later made to abandon that application for this collection as the risks were too high.

Web reporting pilot project Part 2: Be like the Census

A decision was then made to continue the plan for an Agricultural Census web form. External parties had been told there would be one, and it was considered damaging to the ABS' reputation to have a web form available for the Population Census and not the other in the same year. Unfortunately there was no time left for another in-house solution. A new business case was developed asking ABS senior management for funds to pay IBM to adapt the Population Census form application and infrastructure for the Agricultural Census. The application would be hosted by the ABS this time, not by IBM, but their involvement would theoretically ensure that all the infrastructure and security issues were easily resolved, as these all worked fine for the Population Census. The business case was therefore supported.

The 2011 Population Census forms, due to budget reasons, contain the same data items as the 2006 Census. Small changes to questions such as income range updates were made, some testing to improve questions on Internet access was done, and some edits such as around the age and birth date questions were added to the web form to improve data quality. The Census team had very limited development resources for these changes and DCM therefore assisted with the questions and usability testing. A much higher take-up rate for the web form is expected this time compared to 2006, however the Agricultural Census goes into the field first and is therefore a risk to the Population Census if it does not go well.

Thus began a very difficult period of time and budget pressure as well as competing priorities. In the collection area a new project manager was introduced and given his own staff, however the existing collection management group was still involved and were theoretically responsible for the operational aspects of development including conducting testing. The survey owners did not have any additional funding themselves for web form development, while needing to contribute resources to the project to ensure their requirements were met. DCM again actually conducted most of the testing with respondents as we were the only ones with usability experience, and wanted to ensure all that we had learned from previous development was still taken into account. There was much tension determining the specifications, testing requirements, and recommendations for changes following testing. There was also a desire to keep the Agricultural form as

similar as possible to the Population Census form, which had one major benefit of finally reducing the log-in security requirements for the Agricultural form so that the public did not get the impression that the Population Census form was less secure in some way.

In general, it was a major challenge establishing our position that what worked for the Population Census web form and the particular type of respondent who used it would not necessarily work for the more complex Agriculture Census and that quite different respondent group. Conducting as much testing as possible in order to collect new evidence was essential even though the problems that arose were largely predictable and consistent with previous business survey forms. Taking members of the survey owner group and the project management team along to observe the usability tests with real farmers in their places of business helped us to be convincing, but time limited what changes could be made.

Key concerns were that the Agriculture form could not print properly or save after submission, and automatic totals were not included. A number of edits were included instead which had to then be removed because they did not function as desired and could not be fixed in the time remaining. Our research and therefore our standards indicated that the edits being used would be most effective when presented with the question they referred to and if easily suppressed by the respondent if they wished. The overall perspective we push is that respondents want to give us good data, and the edits in our forms should help our respondents rather than obstruct them.

Sequencing through the IBM Agricultural form works on a collapsing not-applicable questions basis, and our research demonstrated that respondents want to know what they are being skipped over. Random access was also desirable for respondents to more easily check records etc. and come back for particular questions. A navigation pane was therefore implemented on the left of the screen, however most observed test respondents did not use it. The lingering concern for the survey is that respondents with only sparse data will not be able to easily find the questions which apply to them and will submit the form anyway with missing data.

Two rounds of usability testing, a small field test, and internal testing with ABS staff volunteers has been completed. System testing including load testing has also been completed. All that could be achieved in the timeframe and budget has been done and the ABS is poised to embark on this major additional challenge for the largest business collection we conduct. July 2011 will show if this effort was sufficient. Without any time for rest, we will then turn to applying the application and lessons to our Labour force survey and all the additional challenges of this repeating household survey normally conducted by interview using Blaise interfaces. In the future, we also hope to implement metadata-derived form generation as part of an information management international collaboration effort.

Conclusion

The ABS has now been officially in the business of developing electronic forms for over a decade. We have learned a lot about our respondents, including that they are not aware of their right to report electronically, are generally nowhere near as concerned about security as we must be to protect their data, and that regular respondents often do not read or even see our letters to them. However, they are also highly enthusiastic about electronic reporting when asked (even those who are inexperienced with the Internet and those who could never manage to access our forms during tests). They are enormously patient with our security requirements and they do want to report correctly, preferring instructions and other self-help to contacting the ABS directly. They also want their previous data able to be kept or returned to them for ease of future reporting and we must endeavour to meet this requirement.

Our lessons around the design of electronic forms, including web forms, are still evolving. We have found that keeping the content of the paper and web forms identical is impossible as well as undesirable, but forms which are very simple can still be quite successful. Automatic totals for numerical data have been expected by respondents, were reasonably easy to implement and have performed well. Automatic sequencing, on the other hand, has been very difficult to implement in a way that effectively moves respondents through to the questions that apply to them. For shorter forms, scrolling through the whole thing works quite well and is therefore enough, whereas for longer, more complex forms where the capability offered by an electronic form should be a major advantage in reducing perceived and actual burden, navigation has been a major challenge due to technical problems and respondent understanding.

We have also learned a few things about influence. Being a section which remains stable with low turnover, gradually developing experience while other areas rise and fall, is not exactly a lesson which can be directly applied elsewhere. However, developing that experience wherever you can in order to demonstrate the value of your input when the 'real' work starts is important. Being prepared to do more than your actual role when needed, while making clear that's what you are doing, increases buy-in from the other stakeholders. Being responsible for capability building highlights your expert authority and maintains your contact with staff working in development. Evidence to back up your claims is of course essential, and for that I thank all the agencies who took the plunge before us and published papers and talked to us so that we could learn lessons from you.