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Methods for Avoiding Non-Response Bias in Academic Business Surveys

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Abstract

Business surveys differ from surveys of populations of individual persons or households in many respects. Two of the most important differences are (a) that respondents in business surveys do not answer questions about characteristics of themselves (such as their experiences, behaviours, attitudes and feelings) but about characteristics of organizations (such as their size, revenues, policies, and strategies) and (b) that they answer these questions as an informant for that organization. ***Academic*** business surveys differ from other business surveys, such as of national statistical agencies, in many respects as well. The one most important difference is that academic business surveys usually do not aim at generating descriptive statistics but at testing hypotheses, i.e. relations between variables. Response rates in academic business surveys are very low, which implies a huge risk of non-response bias. Usually no attempt is made to assess the extent of non-response bias and published survey results might, therefore, not be a correct reflection of actual relations within the population, which in return increases the likelihood that the reported test result is not correct.

This paper provides an analysis of how (the risk of) non-response bias is discussed in research papers published in top management journals. It demonstrates that non-response bias is not assessed to a sufficient degree and that, if attempted at all, correction of non-response bias is difficult or very costly in practice. Three approaches to dealing with this problem are presented and discussed:
(a) obtaining data by other means than questionnaires;
(b) conducting surveys of very small populations; and
(c) conducting surveys of very small samples.
It will be discussed why these approaches are appropriate means of testing hypotheses in populations. Trade-offs regarding the selection of an approach will be discussed as well.

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