

Article

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Developing Statistics New Zealand's Respondent Load Strategy

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Abstract

In 2006 Statistics New Zealand started developing a strategy aimed at coordinating new and existing initiatives focused on respondent load. The development of the strategy lasted more than a year and the resulting commitment to reduce respondent load has meant that the organisation has had to confront a number of issues that impact on the way we conduct our surveys.

The next challenge for Statistics NZ is the transition from the project based initiatives outlined in the strategy to managing load on an ongoing basis.

Key Words: Respondent load, Strategy.

1. Introduction

1.1 Preface

A significant challenge for the future of official statistics is balancing the needs of users against those of respondents.

Finding this balance is increasingly difficult, as the demands of evidence-based policy development mean business and individual respondents receive more requests for information. This increased need for information, along with busier lifestyles and more competitive business practices, means the value exchange associated with giving up time or money to provide information is no longer accepted as a matter of course.

If producers of official statistics seem to be making unreasonable demands for information from the public and businesses, the ongoing supply of data could be at risk. Risk may manifest in different ways, such as less timely data that delays publication, lower quality estimates, or the refusal to supply any data at all. Any of these outcomes could erode trust and confidence in official statistics, and this trust is a vital component of ongoing willingness and cooperation.

The Respondent Load Strategy was developed to provide a clear and consistent framework for addressing load related issues, initially for Statistics New Zealand but potentially also for the wider New Zealand Official Statistics System.

This paper outlines the development of the strategy, the range of initiatives incorporated into the strategy, and future directions once the initial projects have been delivered.

1.2 Respondent load at Statistics New Zealand

Statistics NZ is the main producer of official statistics in New Zealand and in 2007 we surveyed almost 190,000 businesses (over 15% of these received more than one survey), and just over 80,000 individuals for household surveys.

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Because businesses can be selected to respond in more than one survey, and sample selection process for household surveys is designed so that respondents should only be eligible for one survey, the time taken associated with business surveys is much greater than that for households.

This can be seen in Figure 1.2-1 below which shows the trend for aggregate time taken across all Statistics NZ surveys, excluding the 5 yearly Population Census.

Figure 1.2-1
Aggregate time taken

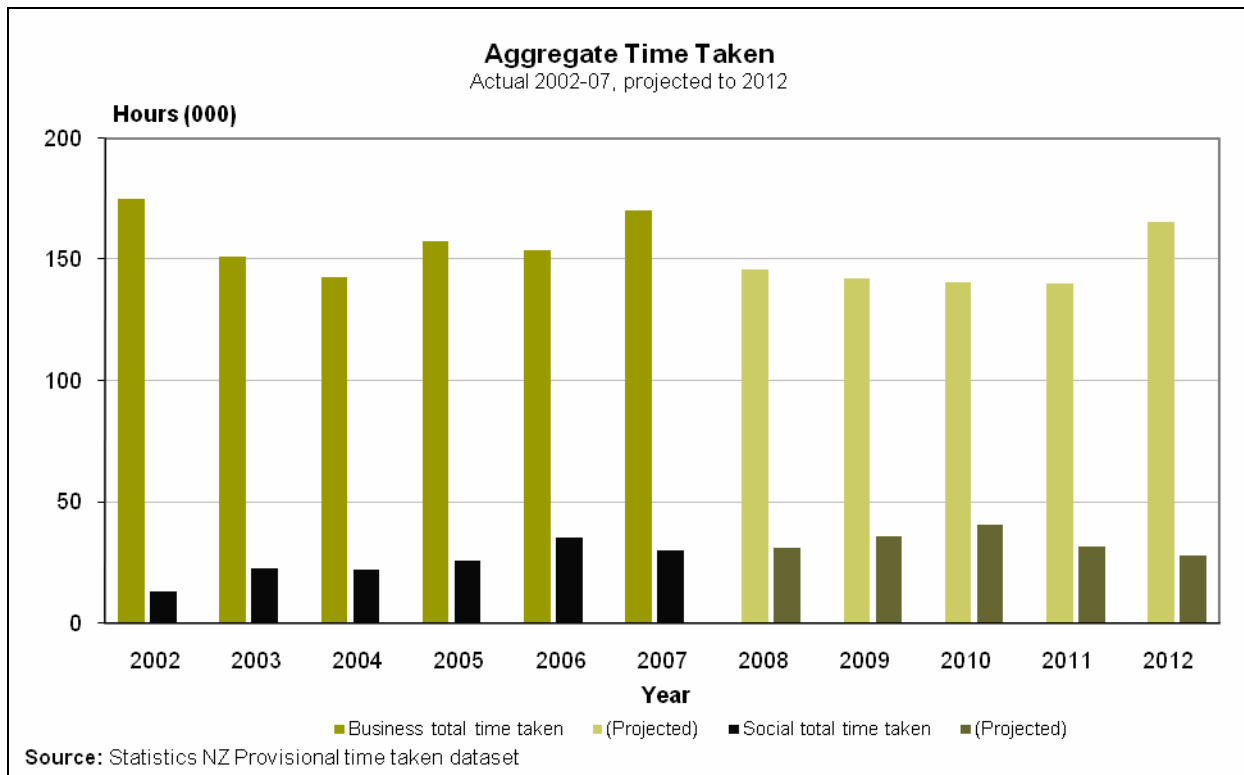


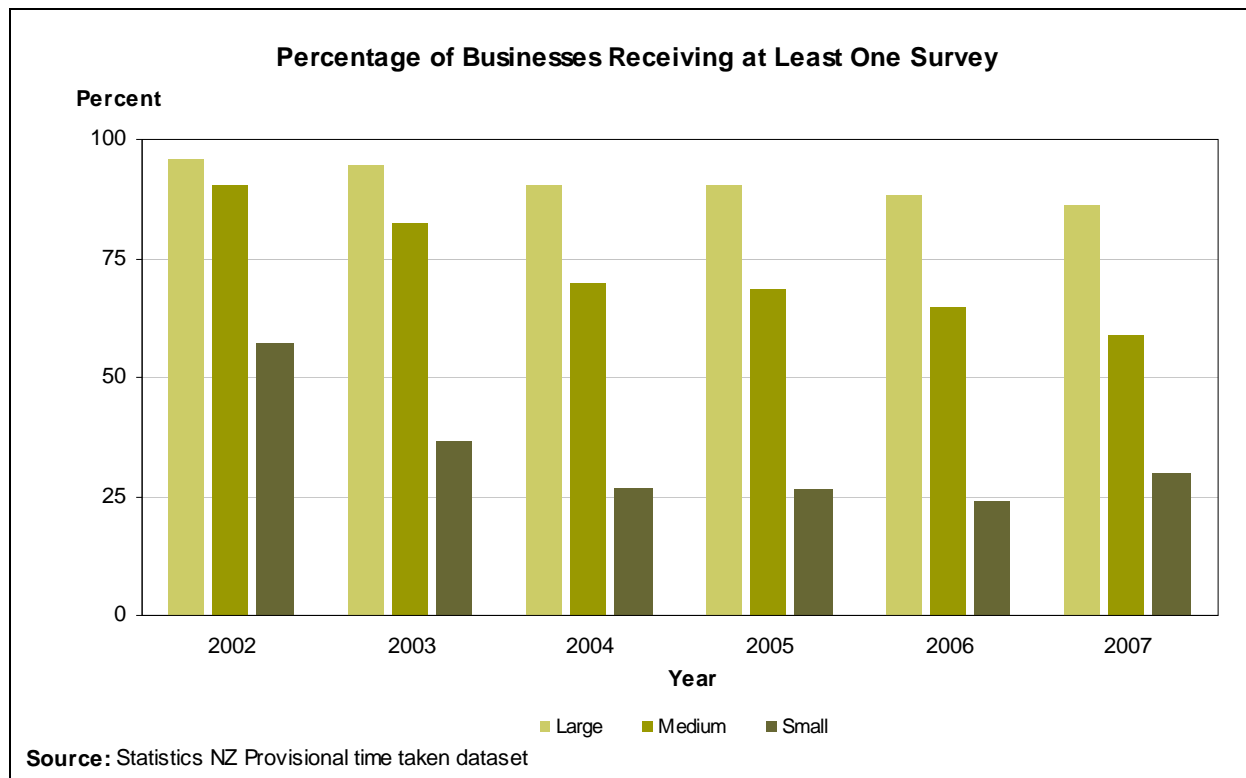
Figure 1.2-1 shows an upward trend for the time taken associated with household surveys that is related to new surveys introduced as part of the Programme for Official Social Statistics, although it is important to recognise that this increase is offset by reduced surveying from other government agencies.

The peaks in the business surveys series (2002, 2007 and 2012) relate to years when the Agriculture Census is run (approximately 60,000 – 65,000 farms in a census year compared to 30,000-35,000 for the years in between).

The downward trend for business surveys time taken is mostly related to the greater use of administrative data sources and significant reductions in sample sizes for our Business Frame maintenance survey (down from 120,000 respondents in 2002 to 60,000 in 2008). The trend is to some extent offset by the introduction in 2005 of a new range of surveys associated with measuring business performance, including the Business Operations and Screen Industry surveys.

In 2002 62% of businesses received at least one survey, this went down to 35% in 2007. This reduction has mostly been in relation to small and medium sized businesses (less than 20 employees and \$NZ 4.4 million annual turnover). This trend is shown in Figure 1.2-2 on the next page.

Figure 1.2-2
Businesses receiving at least one survey



2. Development of the Respondent Load Strategy

2.1 Initiation and workshops

Work started on the strategy in May 2006, although prior to this Statistics NZ had already been working on recommendations from the *Ministerial Panel on Business Compliance Costs Final Report Back*. The initiative was initially driven from the Integrated Data Collection (IDC) division (responsible for data collection for all our surveys, excluding Census), and the proposal for a strategy was endorsed by the Government Statistician.

The importance placed on development of the strategy was demonstrated by the attendance of most of the executive and senior management team at a two day offsite workshop held in August 2006. A second workshop was held in September that was focused on respondent load issues for household surveys.

Both workshops were structured around the scenario planning methodology used by Adam Kahane to help during the transition from Apartheid to democracy in South Africa, and described in his book *Solving Tough Problems* (Kahane, 2004).

The basis of this method was to identify the internal and external factors that have an influence on the main issue - in our case we defined the main issue as the impact on the supply of data due to negative perceptions of load. Once these factors were identified we identified two dimensions for the issue, sustainable supply of data and the use of new or traditional collection practices. These dimensions were used to create a four quadrant model for developing possible scenarios.

As an example, one of the scenarios was based around unsustainable data supply using traditional methods of data collection. The working group assigned this scenario wrote up a short description of what the outcome might look like;

- More collection efforts are made but for less return.
- Critically low response rates for some sub-populations reduce confidence in results.
- The collection of social statistics collapses and is eventually undertaken outside of Statistics NZ.

The aim of developing these scenarios was to describe some possible futures and identify how they might evolve depending on how we choose to react to internal and external influences.

Once the scenarios were developed the workshop participants identified where they thought Statistics NZ was at present and where we thought we should be working towards for the future. There was general consensus that we were currently at a point where the sustainable supply of data was at risk and that we should be looking to change our traditional collection methods.

The main outcome from these workshops was to raise the profile of respondent load and to establish a clear corporate mandate to develop and implement the respondent load strategy.

2.2 Content development

The first draft of the strategy was submitted to senior managers in January 2007 and an executive management reference group was set up to review subsequent drafts. The strategy was officially signed off and made available to the public in February 2008. The extended period between developing the first draft and finalising the strategy was related to a number of factors, with the main ones being a transition to a new Government Statistician and a change to the Minister of Statistics.

The content of the strategy also led to some internal debates, minimising versus reducing respondent load, setting load limits, and different perspectives from the household and business surveys parts of the organisation.

There was concern from some that committing to reduce respondent load was inconsistent with increased demand for more information from government and other users. For example, prior to developing the strategy we had already put in place the Programme of Official Social Statistics (POSS) that was going to result in an increase in the number of household surveys run by Statistics NZ. There was a view that we should only commit ourselves to minimising respondent load, allowing us to increase survey activity but with the implicit assumption that any increase was absolutely necessary. We finally decided on the stronger commitment to reducing load, which is harder to live up to but more likely to result in tangible outcomes that are understood by external audiences including our respondents.

Setting load limits, either the maximum length of time a questionnaire should take to complete or the maximum number of surveys a business should have to complete in a year, was also a controversial issue. There is a statutory obligation for respondents to complete our surveys, based on the assumption that we are only surveying when absolutely necessary. Conceding that there may be a point where load could be too high undermines the premise that the statistics we produce are a 'public good'. We also do not want to compromise on data quality and it would be inappropriate to administer a partial survey where the information need was not met. The projects relating to load limits that were initiated from the strategy are still being worked on but the underlying principle that there is such a thing as too much load, for an individual or a business, has been accepted. The challenge now is to agree on the standards and mechanisms required to manage the tension between need and load.

Respondent load is a different issue for household and business surveys, in large part due to the fact that it is common for businesses to be selected for multiple surveys, but we try to avoid this as much as possible for respondents to household surveys. Household surveys also tend to cost a lot more to collect as they are mostly administered by interviewers, either in personal visits or over the telephone – business surveys are mostly paper and post. People working with household surveys felt that their response rates were under more pressure which is pushing up the cost of collection. Many of the initiatives proposed in the strategy have a business surveys focus as

that is where the bulk of the respondent load issues are and the household surveys area has felt that their issues or differences have not been given the same consideration.

3. Content of the strategy

3.1 Overview

We have introduced a number of initiatives in the last five years that have reduced respondent load, but a strategic framework for the issue had not been formalised. The purpose of Statistics New Zealand's Respondent Load Strategy is to provide that framework and reduce the load on respondents while maintaining output quality.

The strategy is structured around four themes, demonstrating the value of information collected, minimising load, making it easier to respond, and identifying and managing areas of unreasonable load.

By adopting this strategy, we also intend to demonstrate best practice for the management of respondent load across the Official Statistics System.

The strategy has been structured around the goals outlined in the *Statistics New Zealand Statement of Intent 2007*. A summary of the initiatives and work programme is as follows.

3.2 Demonstrate to respondents the value of the information collected

We must ensure that there is a reasonable value exchange when respondents supply data to us. We can achieve this by communicating how government uses the data and by promoting ways that respondents can use the data.

To ensure that respondents obtain value for the investment of their time, they need to be aware that statistics are available with information tailored to meet their needs. The strategy is to promote the value and use of official statistics by:

- Providing information to respondents that demonstrate the value of official statistics
- Undertaking initiatives with community groups and business advocates to raise awareness of the value of official statistics
- Developing Internet-based products that give valuable statistical information to businesses and individuals, and promoting these products through initiatives with communities and respondents.

Respondents need to see that there is value in investing significant time, effort and goodwill to participate in government surveys. If respondents don't perceive that official statistics add value, this impacts on the quality of response. Our research indicates that people who have used statistics are more positively disposed towards responding accurately to surveys.

Understanding respondents and their attitudes towards surveys is critical to understanding how perceived load contributes to non-response. It is also important to know if non-respondents have common characteristics. If we know more about our respondents, we may be able to improve data quality by lowering non-response rates and develop new strategies to improve or maintain coverage.

Our strategy is a combination of assessing information already available in relation to response behaviour (for example, identifying common demographic information about business non-respondents) and communicating with respondents to understand their views and concerns.

The specific initiatives associated with this theme are;

- Communicating with businesses (ongoing)
- Promoting the value of official statistics to business and the community (ongoing)
- Reporting on load (ongoing)
- Understanding the characteristics of non-respondents (completed)

- Understanding respondent attitudes towards surveying (completed)
- Promoting the value of official statistics to individual respondents (ongoing)

3.3 Minimise respondent load

Over the last five years, we have improved processes and implemented a number of measures to minimise respondent load. We made significant gains by using administrative-sourced data, such as tax records, to reduce the amount of direct surveying.

The first option to consider before introducing a new survey is whether administrative sources could be used to supplement or replace direct data collection. We should also assess other survey data that we already hold, or that others across the Official Statistics System have collected.

It is also important to ensure that when we liaise with other agencies about using their data, any extra requirements will not result in additional respondent load.

When direct surveying is the only option, there are still many methodological decisions that can help minimise respondent load. These include improved sample rotation techniques for business surveys and better data modelling.

The over-sampling of Māori is a major issue for household surveying. We must investigate alternatives to alleviate this.

To support much of this work and to keep a consistent focus on respondent load, we have created an advocacy position. This will ensure that we address respondent issues and can give objective advice to senior managers.

When new collections are approved we need to strengthen the assessment of potential load and shift it to the front of the approval process. Survey approval documentation must also be explicit about the load imposed, balanced against the value of the collection.

The initiatives associated with this theme are;

- Increasing the use of administrative data (ongoing)
- A review of the survey approval process (completed)
- Assessing the respondent load impact of new surveys (completed)
- Research into the effects of over-sampling of Māori (not started)
- Development of a respondent advocacy position (completed)
- Develop sample rotation for business surveys (completed)

3.4 Make it easier to respond to surveys

The time and effort required of respondents to complete surveys are valuable commodities and therefore the collection of data should be as efficient as possible. This includes introducing options for how respondents can respond to a particular survey, matching questions to readily understood concepts that are easily recalled/retrieved, and ensuring that information requests are not duplicated.

To make it easy to respond, the strategy is to improve information technology (IT) systems and processes to offer respondents increased choices for the completion of surveys (for example, Internet, telephone) and work towards improved electronic information exchange systems that enable surveys to be filled out at the push of a button.

The best supplier principle is well established at Statistics NZ. While this element is closely linked with the use of administrative sources and reuse of other survey data, it is also related to targeting surveys at the right respondents.

Better maintenance of contact details improves the management of respondents in existing surveys and is another way of ensuring that we direct our surveys to the people in the household or organisation who can provide the information.

We must also ensure that frontline collection areas are responsive to Māori issues and have Māori language capability where appropriate.

The initiatives associated with this theme are;

- Providing information to respondents about their current survey obligations (completed)
- Better management of respondent details (in progress)
- Developing Māori language capability for collection (completed)
- Improve the management of respondents in existing surveys (in progress)
- Increase choices for the mode of response (in progress)
- Investigate integration with standardised reporting systems (in progress)

3.5 Identify and manage areas of unreasonable load

Effective management of respondent load is only possible through consistent measuring and reporting. The measurement of respondent load is fundamental to ensuring we develop policies that balance the need for official statistics against the load on respondents. It enables us to understand and report on existing levels of load, as well as providing a benchmark against which to measure changes in trends and/or the effect of new policies or initiatives over time. Consistent measurement of respondent load will enable us to compare respondent load across the Official Statistics System.

Currently, the measurement of respondent load is patchy and ad hoc both here at Statistics NZ and across the Official Statistics System.

Our long-term strategy will be to develop and implement statistical standards for the measurement of load and advocate their adoption across the Official Statistics System. This will ensure that there are consistent measures against which to benchmark trends and assess the load of individual surveys.

We will undertake an audit of surveys in line with the Official Statistics System protocols, the purpose of which is to re-evaluate existing collections and to establish an ongoing review programme.

We will develop and publish commitments to business and individual respondents. By being open about the load that direct surveying activity imposes and what constitutes a reasonable level of respondent load, we will be providing guidelines to help respondents put their survey obligations in context.

Currently, we have a range of internal practices for minimising respondent load and reports on load in our annual report. However, explicit targets for load and time taken are not publicly available or reported on, therefore, our expectations of respondents are not as clear as they could be.

The initiatives associated with this theme are;

- Developing parameters for the identification of load ‘hotspots’ (in progress)
- Setting time limits for surveys (in progress)
- An audit of existing surveys (in progress)
- Development of other reporting metrics (in progress)
- Measuring the impact of surveying on subpopulations (not started)
- Adoption of consistent actual time taken measures (completed)
- Setting load limits for individuals (not started)
- Measuring how often respondents are selected for surveys (in progress)

4. Respondent load going forward

4.1 Progress with the work programme

Of the twenty six initiatives outlined in the previous section we have completed nine and another nine are in progress. Five initiatives are ongoing and will effectively never finish (for example the focus on using administrative data sources in place of direct surveying), and three are yet to be started. Most of the project work has continued to be led from the Integrated Data Collection division, the main exception being some of the work around communicating the value of official statistics which has been delivered by a separate programme, but is still referenced in the strategy.

A key initiative delivered early in the project was the development of a consistent measuring and reporting methodology for the time taken by respondents to complete our surveys. This methodology was used to produce the data series in Figure 1.2-1 and represents the first time that this sort of data has been edited and reported consistently across surveys. Time taken data provides the basis for our internal and external (in the annual report) reporting on respondent load and this is supplemented by other metrics relating to complaints, the 'willing' response rate (the response rate achieved before reminder activity starts) and the average number of surveys per business per year.

We have engaged with respondents to better understand the impact of our surveys and how the production of official statistics is perceived. This has been complemented by some preliminary demographic analysis of non-response for business surveys.

A framework is now in place to assess respondent load from the earliest stages of survey development, and this is supported by the creation of a respondent advocacy position. The respondent advocate is functionally separate from the data collection area and will work on behalf of respondents to independently review load. This will include reviewing load assessments for new surveys, reviewing individual cases of unreasonable load and requests for relief, as well as promoting the value of official statistics. During this assessment we will be more closely scrutinising the value proposition for individual surveys by comparing the estimated compliance costs with expected benefits.

The appointment of the advocate has also been an important step in the transition from project based initiatives to business as usual. We have recently completed the first load assessment for a new survey that has resulted in a number of potential respondents being removed from the sample. As we finalise other parts of the framework we will be able to identify and resolve load hotspots associated with our ongoing collections and demonstrate tangible reductions in load for individual respondents.

References

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