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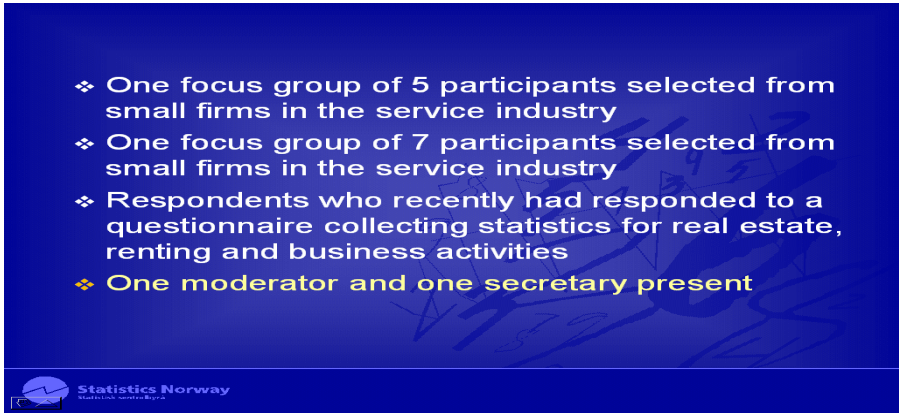
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SEARCHING FOR RESPONSE BURDENS IN FOCUS GROUPS WITH BUSINESS RESPONDENTS

GUSTAV HARALDSEN

This presentation is based on experiences that have been made by Statistics Norway in the Eurostat-founded project *Developing Methods for Assessing Perceived Response Burden (PRB)*. The project aims to develop methods for assessing perceived response burden in business surveys. It is led by Statistics Sweden. In addition the Office of National Statistics in UK is taking part. The strategy followed in the project is first to identify what the business survey respondents perceive as burdensome, and on this basis to develop relevant questions, which tap the perceived response burden. In this paper I will present the design we used in a couple of focus groups that we used to learn more about what was considered to be burdensome tasks in relation to business questionnaires. Our intention is of course to inspire others to run similar focus groups and share their results about perceived response burdens with us.

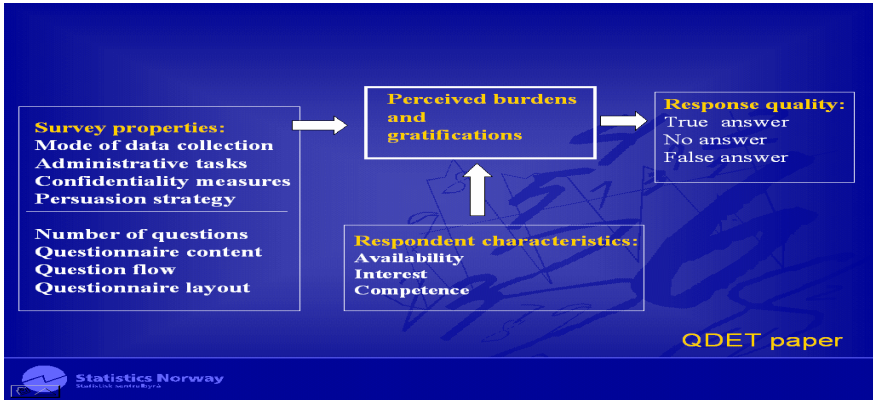
In the trials reported from in this paper, two focus groups were carried out with respondents from businesses in the service industry. The participants were selected among those who had recently responded to a questionnaire collecting statistics for real estate, renting and business activities. All the participants came from firms in the Oslo region. The first group gathered seven participants from rather big firms; most of them with more than 100 employees. The second group had five participants from smaller firms; some of them with only one or a few employees.

Figure 1: Focus Groups in first trial

The focus group guide was based on a revised version of the conceptual model of perceived response burden presented in the paper *Identifying and Reducing the Response Burden in Internet Business Surveys* (Haraldsen 2002). In this version, eight aspects of the survey design which may affect the response burden are named:

1. Mode of survey communication
2. Administrative tasks
3. Confidentiality concerns
4. Persuasion strategy
5. Number of questions
6. Question content
7. Question flow
8. Questionnaire layout

The first four of these properties has to do with the data collection procedure, while the four last are different aspects of the questionnaire used. The perceived response burden is seen as a result of these survey properties in combination with the availability and initial motivation and competence of the business respondent.

Figure 2: Conceptual Response Burden Model

The model is described in more detail in Haraldsen (2002). What is important here is that we wanted to initiate a discussion that covered both the survey design aspects and respondent characteristics indicated in the model during our focus group discussions.

The focus group guide consisted of a mix of topics for discussion and practical exercises. Most of the exercises and visual tools that were used were printed in an eight page booklet given to each participant.

The Focus Group Guide

The focus group agenda was as follows:

1. **Introduction** covering a presentation of the topic of the discussion, of the moderator and the secretary and of how a focus group is set up and run.
2. The participants **introduce themselves** and the firm they are representing. The main purpose of this presentation was to reveal what the participants had in common, and in this way to create a sense of commonness. The important common denominator of the focus groups was that they belonged either to a group of small firms or a group of bigger firms.
3. An **open and general discussion** about the response burden of questionnaires received from Statistics Norway. This discussion was wrapped up by asking each participant to indicate on a scale running from 0 to 6 how easy or burdensome they found the questionnaires sent to them by Statistics Norway.

4. **Prepared discussion** based on a four-page questionnaire used to collect statistics for real estate, renting and business activities. All the participants had completed this questionnaire just a few weeks ago. First the envelope with a letter of introduction, the questionnaire and a separate description of difficult terms were given to the participant. They were asked to open the envelope and read the material the way they would have done if they had received it in their office. Next the moderator focused on five topics. The moderator was free to present these topics in the order he found most natural. The topics were....

4.1. **Readability.** The focus of this discussion was on the layout and the length of the questionnaire, and on the order of questions.

As a point of departure one of the participants was asked to read aloud and comment on question 2, which consisted of 12 sub questions about the international relationships of the firm. The question had a rather long introduction. It consisted of a mixture of questions with fixed response categories and open questions where the respondents should fill in an amount or a percentage. The sub questions were presented over two columns, while the other questions in the questionnaire were presented in a full A4 format. The reading of the question was followed up with a discussion of how easy or difficult it was to understand and find one's way through the different sub questions.

The participants were shown a list of the order of sub questions in question 2 and asked if they found this to be a natural order of questions about international relationships.

The participants were also showed the same kind of list of all the topics covered in the questionnaire and asked to comment on the order of the questions.

Finally the participants were asked...

- if they found this to be a short or long questionnaire
- if they based this impression on the number of pages, the number of questions or on other characteristics of the questionnaire
- how long time they would normally use to complete this questionnaire
- if they considered this to be a short or long time
- if the deadline for completion was considered to be long or short
- if they would prefer to receive the questionnaire at an earlier or later point of time

4.2 **Question problems.** The focus of this discussion was on the definition of question terms, the tasks that the respondents should perform and the response formats and level of detail asked for in the questions. For each of these three aspects we had picked a question from the questionnaire to illustrate the problem.

The discussion about problems with terms and definition of terms used a question about investments (in tools, means of transport and buildings) as a point of departure. In this question it was referred to budget estimates already reported to the tax authorities. The respondents were told to add together some of these, to add investments that were not covered in posts referred to or to exclude some investments that were embedded in the sums given in the previous form. On the separate help sheet the same terms were explained with the help of a more formal definition.

The respondents were asked what kind of explanation they preferred and if these two ways of explaining the terms would give the same result. They were also asked if they found it easy or hard to draw the borderline between those expenses that should be included and excluded.

Four of the questions were explained in more detail on the help sheet, while two remaining questions did not have a separate explanation. The respondents were asked if they found some of the explanation unnecessary or if they missed some explanations. They were also asked if they preferred to have difficult terms explained to them on a separate sheet or in the questionnaire itself.

As an example of **questions that may cause calculation problems** we used a question that asked for the average number of owners working in the firm, the average number of employees and the total man-labor carried out in the firm. The focus group participants were asked how difficult it was to answer these questions and how they estimated the figures asked for. They were also asked if it would be easier or more difficult to give monthly figures instead of estimating an annual average.

In the third part of the discussion a question that asked for total and activated expenses used on computer hardware and software was used to discuss **how easy or difficult it is to give detailed figures**. In this question the expenses should be given in 1000 kroner (= 125 €).

The discussion about question problems was wrapped up by asking the respondents to indicate in the exercise booklet whether it was difficult terms, difficult tasks or difficult response formats that caused most frustration for the respondents in business surveys. This evaluation exercise was simply presented like this:

Which aspects of the questions cause most and least troubles in statistical questionnaires? Write in the words "most" and "least".

Definition of terms _____

Calculation of answers _____

The level of detail in the answers _____

Similar cards were also used in later evaluations.

4.3 **Administrative tasks.** The participants were asked to write down which tasks that took place before, during and after the completion of the questionnaire. The results were presented around the table and discussed.

The participants were asked to indicate in the booklet which of the steps from preparation to posting the answers that was felt less and most burdensome. They were also asked, if they had the opportunity, which of these activities they rather would be spared for.

4.4 **Attitudes towards the task.** The focus in this part of the discussion was on the interest for and attitudes towards statistical information and confidentiality concerns.

In the introduction letter enclosed with the questionnaire it says that statistics about real estate, renting and business activities are used as planning and management tools, both by politicians and in the business world. Our first question to the participants was if they could suggest in what way this statistics was useful for policy makers and the industry.

A table and press release from statistics produced from the test questionnaire was shown to the participants. They were asked if they had ever sought information from any of the publications or web pages of Statistics Norway. They were also asked if they found the press release and the table presented to them interesting and useful. If not, it was discussed how the statistics could be presented to make it more interesting.

The establishments are obliged by law to answer the questionnaire used in this test. There is a reference to the relevant paragraphs in the introduction letter. The participants were asked if they knew what these regulations said about the duty to answer and about what may happen if one refused. They were also asked what they thought would be the consequence if they were free to decide if they wanted to fill in the questionnaire or not.

4.5 The burden of specific questionnaires vs the total burden of all questionnaires one has to fill in.

- Questions posed in this part of the discussion were...
- How many statistical questionnaires do you complete during a year?
- How much time do you use on this kind of work?
- Are you the only person who fills in all questionnaires or is this job given to more than one person in the firm?
- Do you feel that these questionnaires represent a high or low workload?

After the prepared discussion, the participants were given a 10 minutes break.

5. Summary with the help of Concept Mapping

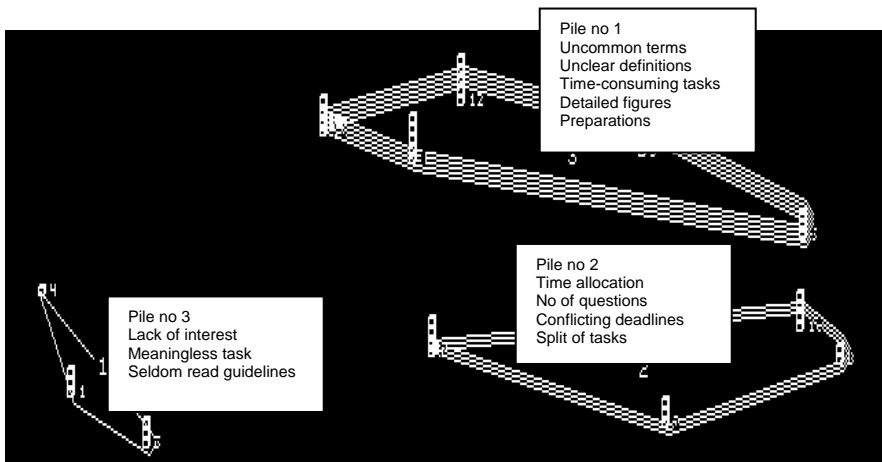
During the break, the moderator and secretary wrote down what they considered to be the main conclusions about what caused response burdens in business surveys. After the break the participants were given the opportunity to subtract or add new points to the list.

After a list was agreed upon, we used it as a basis for a concept analysis that was carried out in the following way:

- Each participant was asked to write down each statement on a small card
- Afterwards they were asked to indicate by a number from 0 to 6 how easy or burdensome they found the aspect described by the statements on the cards were-
- Finally they were asked to put cards that they felt described similar statements together and put a paper clip on each pile of cards.

The cards and the exercise booklet were left in a blank envelope as meeting broke up. The cards were later analyzed with the help of The Concept System, which is a program for concept mapping developed by William M. K. Trochim. The program offers a visual presentation of what statements the focus group participants have grouped together and the weight they have given the cards in each group.

As an illustration of the method, we have copied the concept map developed from the first focus group (with bigger firms) In this example the statements have been split in three piles. Pile no 1 contains those statements that were considered to burden the respondents most, while the statements listed in pile 2 and 3 were generally considered to be less important.



What did the Focus Groups tell us about Perceived Response Burden?

The main purpose of this paper is not to go into detail about substantial results from the focus groups, but rather to present the procedure used, and to discuss if this kind of focus groups can help us to operationalize the concept "Perceived Response Burden". The first step towards this aim, however, must be to get a clearer picture of what the business survey respondents perceive as burdensome. Only then do we know what concepts we should seek to measure. Therefore we will sum up some main conclusions from the focus group discussions.

Put in a slogan form, the results can be summarized in the following statement: ***The burdens of answering the questions seemed to be lower than the burdens that the respondents recognized in the questionnaire.***

Both groups recognized many problems in the questionnaires. But these problems did not cause as many problems for the respondents as we would expect. There are two reasons for this. The first one is rather encouraging, while the second one is more depressing.

1

The good news is that it seems to be a happy correlation between response competence and response burden. What we found in these two focus groups was that companies that should report a lot of complicated figures also had the most competent respondents; while firms with less competent respondents also had an easier task.

Respondents in bigger firms are more professional than respondents in small firms. In our focus groups the participants from the bigger firms generally were economist that had a

controller function in the firm. Their job was to perform different kinds of quality controls and they had established a documented practice for how the statistical questionnaires should be answered. Because of this they did not find the normal reports to Statistics Norway especially burdensome. In smaller firms the respondents had different educational backgrounds and held no formal controller function. On the other hand the smaller firms also had less information to report and had an easier task when the questions asked for calculations. Consequently even they found the respondent's job to be rather easy. For instance, when the questionnaire ask for the average number of employees last year, this needs to be calculated in bigger firms but normally has a straightforward answer in firms with just a few employees.

This observation is a very good illustration of the point that the perceived response burden is the result of the combination of survey design and respondent characteristics.

2

The not so good news is that when there initially is a response burden problem, the respondents seem to be rather clever to find short cuts that lift off some of the burdens. When we looked at the different aspects of questions, it was obvious that "unclear terms" and "terms that did not fit with the business records" were the most important problems in the questionnaires. One participant phrased it this way:

"Even if it is information gathering and the calculations that takes most time, it is the descriptions of what we shall report that leads to most frustration".

Even in the small sample of questions used in these focus groups and the small sample of business respondents gathered for the discussions, we revealed several examples of terms that were interpreted in different ways. And the most common complaint about the questions was that the terms did not fit with the records available. But we were also told that the standard solution to this kind of problems was to do a qualified guess based on existing records rather than bothering with complicated definitions and extra calculations. In other words, the respondents very often seem to have solved potential response burden problems with the help of simplified response strategies. The cost of this way of reducing the response burden is of course that the data quality may suffer.

3

In addition to these two observations, there is a third one that we think is important in the overall picture of how business respondents react to statistical questionnaires. This is a unison ignorance and skepticism towards the value of the statistics produced from the information the respondents provide. Only a few of the focus group participants had ever logged into Statistic Norway's homepage or ever read a statistical publication. The only

statistics they knew about was the price index, which some of them had used to revise their own prices. When they were showed a press release and a copy of one of the tables produced from the questionnaire in focus, none of them had seen this kind of tables earlier and none of them could see any immediate use of the results.

There seem to be two reasons for this lack of interest. The first is that the tables statistical agencies generally publish are not tailored to statistical needs in the companies. Several of the focus group participants told that they collected figures from competitors in order to compare their own resources, investments and results with those of other firms running the same kind of business. But none of them were aware of that Statistics Norway perhaps could produce the same kind of tables.

The other reason for the minimal interest in statistics seems to be a rather negative evaluation of one's own contributions. Because many of the respondents choose short cuts when they are faced with difficult question, and that short cut seem to be accepted, this has a negative effect on the credibility of statistical products. One participant told us

"The first time I responded to the questionnaire I spent a lot of time on it, but still expected that Statistics Norway would call me up because something was wrong. But I never heard from them. As a result I do not take the task so serious anymore".

In other words, the absence both of useful statistical products and of quality controls, seem to lead to a laissez faire attitude toward the tasks we ask the respondents to perform. For the project this means that it may be difficult to measure the perceived response burden for other respondents than those who fill in the questionnaire for the first time. This based on the assumption that, as a result of the initial exposure, the potential response burdens of the questionnaires are avoided at later encounters. Instead the quality- and credibility problems appear to be more serious than a heavy response burden.

How to Improve the Focus Group Guide and Procedure?

We have four ideas for improvements of the methods used to map the perceived response burdens in establishments:

1. More effort should be made in order to identify companies and respondents that have a high response burden. In coming focus groups we think it is important to look for questionnaires where both big and small firms need to answer all questions and look for small firms that have a lot of questionnaires to answer.
2. We also think that it is important to ask the participants more about their personal characteristics than what we did in the first focus group session. Also when we later operationalize a new response burden concept we believe that we should pay more attention to the characteristics of the respondent in addition to company characteristics.

3. The concept mapping that we performed in the summary section of the focus group wrapped up the focus group discussion very well. Therefore, more time should be set off for this exercise. The list of statements should more clearly state response burden problems than what was the case in these two test groups. In a focus group that run for two hours, the concept mapping can only be run half ways. Ideally, the respondents should be confronted with the results of the mapping and be asked to comment on the results. But there is not time enough to process and present the data so quickly that this can be done. An alternative procedure could be to send the results to the participants after they have been analysed, and ask them to respond with their comments. A positive side effect of such a procedure might be that, in contrast to earlier experiences as respondents, the participants this time receive some interesting feedback.
4. In addition to focus groups, individual interviews should be run. Statistics Sweden is presently following up this advice.

The two focus group test referred to in this paper address the perceived response burden, while the question how the response burden should be measured remains unresolved. In later focus groups we should also try to discuss and test different measurement methods. We think that the distinctions we have made between recognized problems and actual response burdens, is important. The response burden seems to be those burdens that the respondents both recognize and are willing to bear. A measurement that is not able to distinguish between these two aspects may not be very useful. Thus, it might be that the original term "perceived response burden" need to be split up into the perceptions of survey problems and the perceptions of respondent problems; and that both these terms need to be operationalized.

References

Haraldsen, Gustav, 2002: Identifying and reducing the Response Burden in Internet Business Surveys. Paper presented at the International Conference on Questionnaire Development, Evaluation, and Testing Methods (QDET). Charleston, South Carolina, November 14-17, 2002.

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