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Topic (iii): Improving the respondent experience

**COMMUNICATION STRATEGY TO REDUCE NON-RESPONSE IN
ENTERPRISE SURVEYS AT THE STATISTICAL OFFICE OF THE
REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA**

Working Paper

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I. Introduction

1. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (hereafter SURS) is facing declining response rates in enterprise surveys. Although the reporting of the data for the enterprise surveys is obligatory by law, some of the enterprises refuse to take part in the statistical surveys. There are several reasons for this, among them the most important is the economic situation in the country; additional workload from the state (e.g. SURS) is seen as additional burden and filling out the questionnaires is mostly seen as an unproductive activity, more so in micro and small enterprises.
2. When designing or revising an enterprise survey, administrative sources are used whenever possible to avoid duplicating requests for information.
3. The data that cannot be timely obtained from administrative sources are for the majority of surveys collected with self-administrated paper questionnaires. We do not include a return envelope with pre-paid postage. In 2013 we launched e-reporting for some surveys.
4. In all survey statistics, non-response has the potential to reduce the quality of enterprise survey estimates. SURS has taken measures already in the previous medium-term programme, 2008-2012, to minimize non-response through centralized communication with the reporting units and by improving communication means. An important measure for reducing non-response and for achieving better quality of survey statistics is enhanced communication with the enterprises.
5. The result was setting up the unit for communication with the reporting units in the Data collection division at SURS. The main task of the unit is to improve all SURS's communication with these units in different modes (e-mail, mail, telephone). It is internally divided into teams: a team for providing answers to toll free calls and for writing replies to inquiries sent to a common e-mail address. The toll free calls and common e-mail address are listed on all SURS's questionnaires as well as on advance letters and reminders. The unit also looks into the reminders and outbound calls and makes necessary calls within the activity of managing logical controls for paper questionnaires.

6. In the current medium-term programme, 2013-2017, the aim of the unit is to improve and set some basic principles on the communication strategy with businesses. To be able to do this we have to learn more about the businesses by monitoring their responding practices. At SURS we plan to make visits to the premises of the businesses on a more regular basis. Our aim is also to promote SURS's products and services among the businesses. Our general goal is to improve the image of SURS among businesses and the wide public and to show them that the statistics we produce are indispensable for policy and decision-making.
7. This Working paper will present the current communication with businesses and further plans to develop and enhance communication in order to minimise non-response among businesses and to ensure high quality business statistics.

II. Non-response evaluation

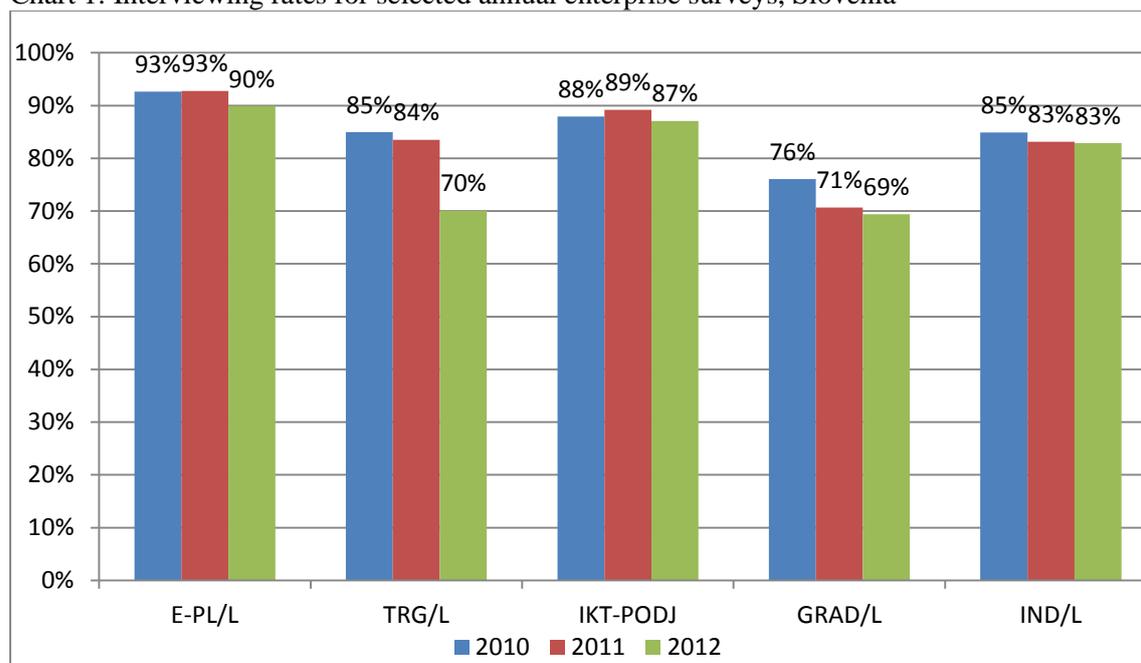
A. Assessment and plans

8. SURS is a production process oriented institution. Statistical data production is organised via the data collection division, four subject matter divisions (macroeconomic statistics, business statistics, demography and social statistics, and environmental statistics), the dissemination division, the IT division, and the general methodology and standards division. Hence, the former is an important driving force in development projects within SURS.
9. Although facing strict reduction of financial and human resources imposed by the government, SURS is to provide the same scope of high-quality statistics. The users' requests for new data and analyses can be considered as a constant increase in the number of surveys. For efficient process optimisation which is to enable presentation of all requested data to the users, several aspects of the data collection process are being optimised.
 - a. When deciding to collect new variables, the possibility of data collection from internal and administrative sources is reviewed and implemented as first step.
 - b. We strive to reduce the response burden on businesses with sample size optimization and introduction of coordinated sampling.
 - c. At each survey revision our goal is to reduce the scope of the survey and remove the unnecessary variables and those that can be timely obtained from administrative or other sources. If it is possible the frequency of the survey is lessened (from monthly to yearly).
 - d. We make efforts to standardise communication with the reporting units.

To lower the response burden we are introducing up-to-date tools and methods of good practices for the communication with businesses.

10. In the case of some enterprise surveys, SURS is facing declining response rates in annual surveys.

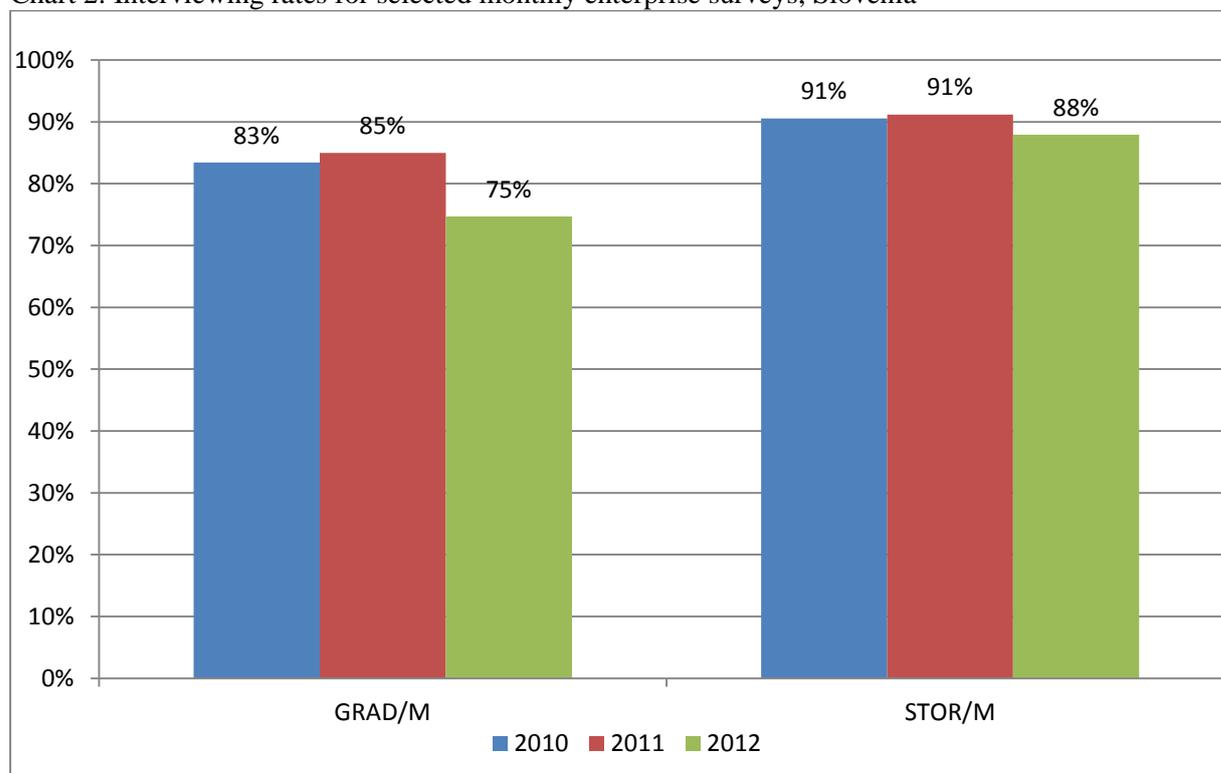
Chart 1: Interviewing rates for selected annual enterprise surveys, Slovenia



Note: E-PL/L: annual questionnaire on consumption of energy, fuels and selected oil derivatives; TRG/L - annual questionnaire on retail trade, wholesale and commission trade; IKT-PODJ – annual questionnaire on the usage of information-communication technologies in enterprises; GRAD/L: annual questionnaire on the construction activity of enterprises; IND/L - annual questionnaire on industry.
Source: SURS

11. In the case of monthly surveys, interviewing rates are calculated as yearly averages.

Chart 2: Interviewing rates for selected monthly enterprise surveys, Slovenia



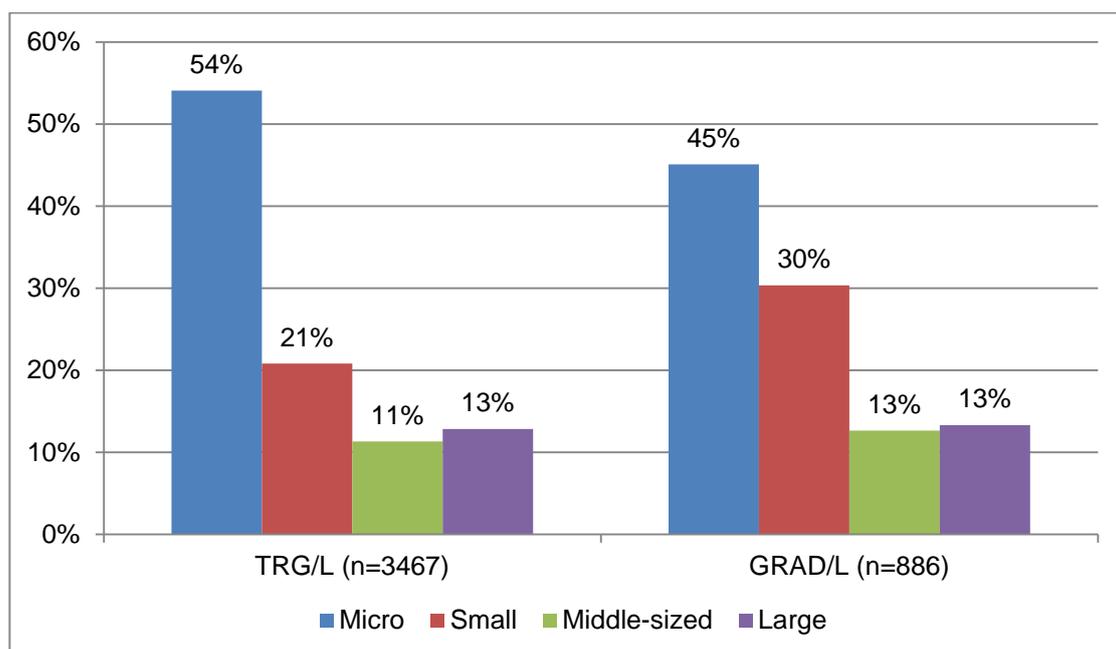
Note: GRAD/M - monthly questionnaire on construction works in Slovenia; STOR/M: monthly questionnaire on turnover in service activities.
Source: SURS

12. At SURS our ambition is to transfer as much communication as possible to the least expensive mode - electronic media. This task seems very difficult, since we have to deal with the combination of

different modes if we want to achieve the goal that each reporting unit is reminded at least once regardless of the mode of reminding (electronic, paper or telephone).

13. Until 2012 the reporting units were reminded in paper mode. If the key responding unit did not react to the paper reminder, then the unit was contacted via telephone. The address list for paper reminders was obtained from the Business Register. Telephone numbers were obtained from different sources: telephone directory of business units, internet and questionnaires.
14. Due to budgetary restrictions among governmental services, we aim to transfer to non-paper communication. So we introduced in 2012 e-mail reminders instead of paper ones. One of the side effects of not reminding our reporting units in a standard way was the drop of the response rates in some surveys and more contacts by phone.
15. Sources for e-mail addresses for reporting units are: filled out questionnaires (contact information section), telephone directory of business units and internet.
16. All contact information for survey instance is stored in address list that is updated regularly at SURS.
17. Chart 3 shows the percentage of the observed units to which we were not able to assign the corresponding e-mail address. The percentage ranged from 11% up to 54%. Most problematic were again micro and small enterprises, which are also our biggest challenge when it comes to responding to our surveys.

Chart 3: Percentage of missing e-mail addresses according to the size of the enterprise, Slovenia, 2012

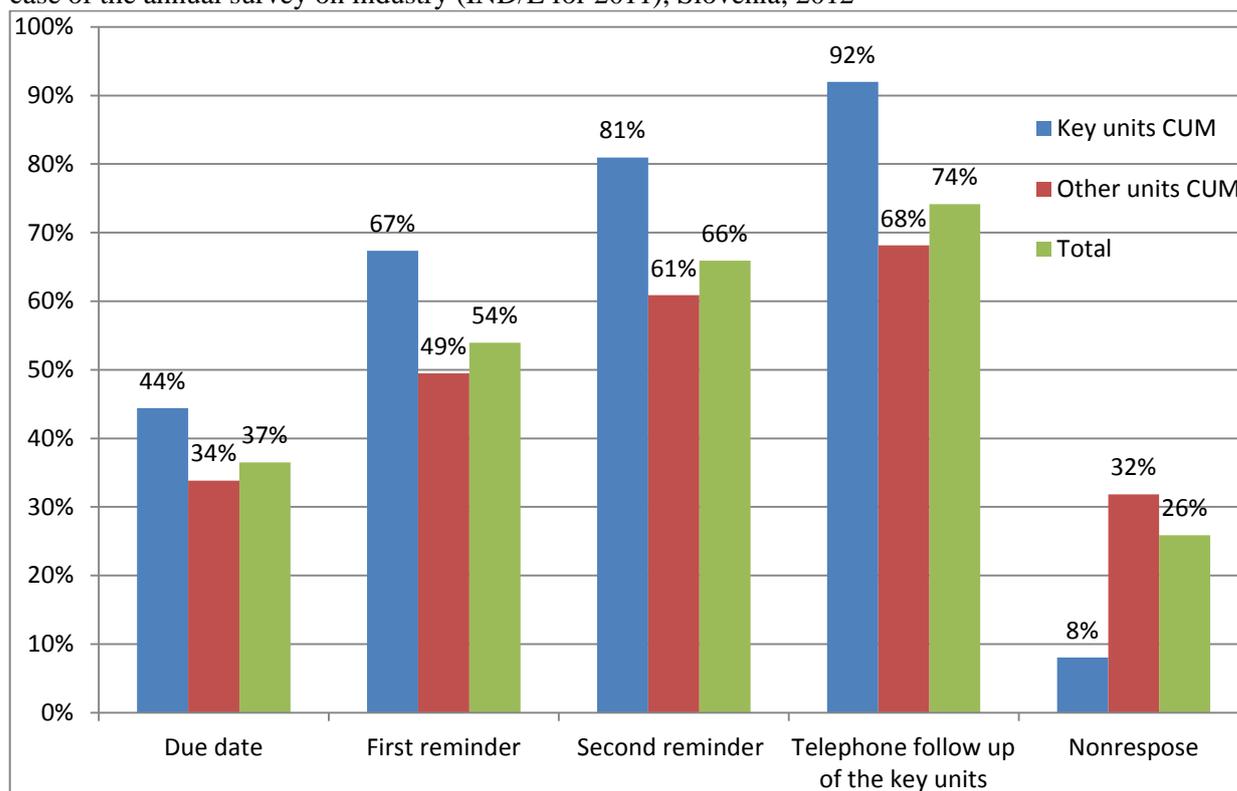


Note: TRG/L: annual questionnaire on trade (Retail trade, wholesale and commission trade); GRAD/L: annual questionnaire on the construction activity of enterprises.
 Source: SURS

18. With the telephone follow-up we would like to obtain more structured information on the reporting units. With such information we aim to update and complement missing information on the contact person (person who is reporting data for the survey): name, telephone, e-mail address; the reason for not having responded sooner, etc.
19. In 2012 we adopted the following communication strategy for reminding the reporting units to report the data for the specific survey:

- a. 3 working days before the due date an electronic notification informing of the survey is sent to the reporting unit.
 - b. 3 working days after the due date the first e-reminder is sent to the reporting unit.
 - c. 7 working days after the first reminder, the second e-reminder is sent to the reporting unit.
 - d. 7 working days after the second reminder, the telephone follow-up of key reporting units starts.
20. This strategy is used in the case of paper data collections (SURS mails out paper questionnaires); in the case of mixed mode data collection (electronic and paper mode) the strategy will be slightly adopted.
21. At SURS we would like to come up with the strategy that is least intrusive, but effective.
22. In Chart 4 we can assess the net effect of reminding the reporting units in the case of the annual survey on industry. We can observe that in 2012 less than half of the units sent the completed questionnaire by due date. Others had to be reminded in some way. The effect of the first reminder was 23% in the case of key reporting units and 16% for others. The effect of the second reminder was 14% for key units and 11% for other units. The telephone follow-up had the effect of 11% for key users vs. 7% in the case of other units. As mentioned before, populations of small and micro sized enterprises are most susceptible to reporting burden.

Chart 4: Cumulative response rates according to some key dates in the data collection process. The case of the annual survey on industry (IND/L for 2011), Slovenia, 2012



Source: SURS

23. This year we have adopted some novelties in the address list for a specific survey: for each survey we are now able to daily monitor the return of the questionnaires. Analysis of this kind will enable us to have better overview on the behaviour of reporting units and will enable us to set up the optimal plan for conducting the surveys in the field.

III. Communication with businesses

B. Development of communication

24. The data collection division traditionally encompassed four departments dealing with reporting and processing of reported data received from reporting units:
 - a. Manual data entry and scanning of the paper questionnaires.
 - b. Preparation and update of address lists and dispatching questionnaires, informing business about the survey and sending out reminders.
 - c. Collection of the questionnaires, telephone follow-up of the non-respondents and central assignment of the data collection outcome codes (eligibility status codes).
 - d. Logical controls of the data.
25. The last two mentioned departments and subject-matter statisticians were involved in the communication with business units. Until 2008 businesses contacted us via telephone or fax or via paper communication (e.g. notes about operation of the business on paper questionnaire or in a letter). In 2008 SURS opened a common mailbox for communication with the reporting units. But even then communication and the contents of the communication were recorded on paper for each survey. For different surveys different persons were in charge and it could happen that the same unit was called more than once per day to participate in different surveys or for other reasons. The traditional organisation of the data collection division added noise into the processes.
26. A strategy of work with the reporting units and reduction of their response burden has been proposed for the first time in the plan for 2008-2012. The strategy is based primarily on the standardisation of contacts with reporting units and the introduction of e-reporting. The main goals of communication were one entry point for communication, SURS offering prompt help and enabling the reporting unit to select the desired mode of communication in the case of questions, required explanations or other reasons and the response to a unit should be short and understandable. The strategy aimed to strengthening the cooperation with the reporting units as SURS is dependent on the data it receives from businesses and the lack of data of sufficient quality may be critical for producing high-quality statistics.
27. The strategy encompassed the following ways of improvement:
 - a. The availability of one contact point for answers to survey questionnaires is important. It should be in one place and with different contact modes enabling the reporting units the opportunity to choose the most adequate way to establish a contact, i.e. by calling to a toll free telephone number, or by e-mail address, mail address. The response from SURS is to be provided promptly.
 - b. A constant task of SURS is to acquire the necessary data by minimizing the response burden of the businesses. For SURS it is also very important that the business understands the purpose of the survey for which it should provide the data.
28. The result of the development according to this strategy and optimisation of the processes was the reorganisation of the data collection division and establishment of new processes in the data collection division.

C. Current organisation and processes

29. A year ago the Data collection division at SURS was reorganised in order to enable better services to the reporting units. Now the data collection division has two main departments:

- a. Data reception for dispatching and collecting the questionnaires, sending out the letters and e-mails to selected respondents, address lists management, assignment of the outcome codes (eligibility status codes), data capture and central point for collecting the data from administrative and other sources.
 - b. Enterprise cooperation for all communication with the reporting units, including telephone follow-up of the non-respondents and completion of the missing data, logical controls of the data and the newly established Contact centre.
30. The development of functions and process optimization are on-going. The goal of the enterprise cooperation department is to manage all communication with business units. Communication has to be monitored in a way that analysis of the paradata (data about the filling out of the questionnaire) is possible. In this way the department would gain more profound knowledge on the response process and response behaviour of the businesses.
31. The enterprise cooperation department includes a single entry point - Contact centre - for incoming communication with business entities regarding the transmission of data and instructions for filling out the questionnaire for statistical surveys. The intention is to increase and simplify the accessibility of SURS with toll-free telephone number.
32. The Contact centre employees used to work on manual logical controls of the questionnaires. With the introduction of semi-automatic manual controls they were transferred to the Contact centre, where their main task is to communicate with the reporting units. They should have the knowledge on statistical surveys and processes, skills in communication, sense for teamwork and good knowledge of the Customer Relationship Management system (hereafter CRM system). Employees in the Contact centre obtain knowledge on specific statistical surveys by participating in the training before the fieldwork (before sending out the questionnaires). The training is prepared by subject-matter statisticians. During the training, the time plan of data collection process and questionnaire are presented and explained in detail.
33. For involvement of the Contact centre into communication we set up the standard that in 2013 all paper questionnaires must contain the common e-mail address and the toll-free telephone number. Both are in the work domain of the Contact centre. On the SURS's internet site the Contact centre takes care of "frequently asked questions section", where reporting units can find information about the survey of interest.
34. The Contact centre constantly records all questions and answers into the CRM system. At the end of the working day employees review the questions and, if necessary, inform the survey-matter statisticians about them by e-mail. The Contact centre regularly examines unresolved inquiries of the units and provides answers or instructions as quickly as possible. In the CRM questions with provided answers are coded.
35. After the end phase of the survey, analysis of the work performed is prepared.
36. For proper operation we have established the user-friendly written rules and phone communication with units. The Contact centre has different procedures for different types of questions, e.g.
- a. a unit asks for a questionnaire because it cannot find it – send out a new one;
 - b. a unit wishes to correct the data in the questionnaire that have already been sent to SURS – receive correction and mediate it to responsible person in the department;
 - c. a unit communicates a change in directory data – mediate the data;
 - d. a unit has a methodological question - the question can be answered if the employee in the Contact centre knows the answer; for more difficult questions, the call or the e-mail is

directed to the subject-matter statistician, who provides the answer and informs the Contact centre about the answer;

- e. a unit complains and wants to contact the superiors – mediate the data to the superiors with details of communication.
37. We reroute the calls to the employees in the Contact centre according to fair distribution. If all the lines are occupied, instead of music for waiting, the reporting unit can listen to some interesting statistical facts that were compiled, presented in a way to promote statistics. We have already received some positive feedback on this from our reporting units.
38. In 2013 two surveys were launched for e-reporting (annual survey on ICT usage in enterprises, and monthly survey on turnover and value of stocks in industry) where we divided technical and other support. Technical support (problems with registration, sending out the questionnaire) is offered by the common governmental service for citizens by a toll free telephone number while the Contact centre at SURS is in charge of answering the questions on the methodology of the survey.
39. In the surveys included in e-reporting the Contact centre is responsible that the right person is registered in the application for e-reporting. The Contact centre is also responsible to detect whether some other unit is reporting data for the observed unit (the unit selected in the sample and to which the reported data should refer) and to establish links between the observed unit and reporting unit (the unit which is actually responding for the observed unit) in the address list.
40. The data collection division is now operating in several collection modes (paper, phone, fax, e-mail, Excel and WEB questionnaires) in the system of e-reporting. Different collection modes complicate the data collection process but multi-mode data collection can be implemented due to common address lists held in one place for all modes of reporting.

IV. Further plans

41. In order to reduce the response burden, SURS will be strongly oriented towards administrative sources and new data sources such as private databases, social networks, Big data, etc. SURS will optimise the handling of paper questionnaires and equalize the time that passes from the reception of the questionnaire to the implementation of the logical control for paper and e-questionnaires.
42. In the following years we plan to strengthen the cooperation with the reporting units. SURS will provide quality with constant improvement of the competence of its employees in the Contact centre. By introducing new procedures and processes (semi-automatic editing, visits on site), SURS will standardise and optimise the entire process of work and as a result adjust its organisation.
43. Motivation of enterprises and cooperation with them will be upgraded in SURS by strengthening the trust of the enterprises and general public. In communication with reporting units SURS will inform them how they can use SURS's products and services in their work. Communication will take place in different ways, e.g. by telephone, by letters – thank you letter and announcement of surveys for the coming year, by on-site visits at business's premises, by preparing additional data analysis (benchmark) for a selected industry or field, by offering assistance in finding the data that the business needs, etc.
44. With the introduction of new and more demanding activities the knowledge regarding the business's responding process and behaviour will rise. At SURS we are planning to monitor the workload of the employees and work on defining the optimal workload, so that communication and service will be effective.
45. Still there are some topics that we will need to address:

- a. With the new system for administration of the address lists for business surveys, we have links between the observed and reporting units. We should consider both units when preparing reminders and standards for communication.
- b. Reporting calendars for the enterprises.
- c. Communication with non-responding units and development of the motivation strategy for reporting.
- d. Communication according to the unit size and the competence of the person who is reporting the data (i.e. management, accounting, production, etc.).