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## **Communication with respondents in business surveys conducted by Reporting Portal**

Anna Dlugosz (Central Statistical Office Poland)

[a.dlugosz@stat.gov.pl](mailto:a.dlugosz@stat.gov.pl)

### ***Abstract***

Respondents must be put central in a survey process. Communication with them is a crucial issue on every stage of a survey. Purposes for communication with respondents are to receive data with enough completion and low costs. In other words the main aim of communication is to motivate them to deliver data of good quality and on time.

Business surveys in Poland are mandatory conducted by the Reporting Portal in the electronic form. From the point of communication a major difficulty with this method is that a respondent haven't direct contact with an interviewer.

Modern methods of collecting data lead to modern methods of communication. But along with modern methods of communication we use also traditional ones – we used mixed-mode approach to communication. We use:

Internet:

- The Reporting Portal
- Website
- E-mails
- Telephone contacts
- Traditional telephone contacts
- Statistical hotline
- Traditional paper letters

Modes of communication depends mainly on a stage of a survey, a function and purpose of communication, a target group and are disparate for one-way and two-way communication.

# Communication with respondents in business surveys conducted by Reporting Portal

*Anna Dlugosz  
Central Statistical Office of Poland  
a.dlugosz@stat.gov.pl*

## I. Introduction

Significant changes in the way of statistical surveys taking place in recent years, affect not only methods of collecting data, but also sources of information. With the purpose of reducing the administrative burden on enterprises, statistical offices in many countries replace surveys conducted with the use of questionnaires by data from administrative sources. In search of new data sources, statisticians consider making use of completely new areas of information, called 'big data'. 'Traditional' role of respondents seems to be less and less important and become updated.

But, as we know, it's not always true. Data received on a regular basis directly from respondents (especially entrepreneurs) are still the most important source of information for business statistics, describing fast-changing trends in economy. It's almost impossible to imagine effective statistical system, publishing short-term economic indicators, without this kind of surveys: official statistics without respondents simply doesn't exist.

What is also important, the role of respondent in a statistical process has changed over time: respondent is no longer only a data provider, obliged by law to submit data in appropriate format and on time. Nowadays, respondent is a partner for the system of official statistics and must be put central in a survey process.

Needless to say, this new type of relationship between the official statistics and respondents requires good communication and mutual trust. We know well how good communication is important in any project; how good exchange of information is essential for every participant involved in every kind of activity connected with this project.

The same rules are applicable to a process of conducting of a statistical survey. In this case, good communication doesn't mean only providing respondents with information about their obligations and deadlines. Respondents need to be sure that data submitted by them really matters for statistics, participation in a survey is very important and they can always ask statisticians for help in case of any problem connected with the survey. Benefits are obvious for respondents and for statisticians: of course, the biggest benefit for official statistics is the data of good quality, reliable and delivered in a timely manner.

In order to achieve these goals, Polish Central Statistical Office communicate with respondents in many different ways and on every stage of a survey.

## II. Programming of surveys

According to the Law of 29 June 1995 on Official Statistics, the most essential legal act for all Polish statisticians, statistical surveys must be specified in the annual programme of statistical surveys of

official statistics. The annual programme is signed by the Prime Minister and issued in the form of the regulation of the Council of Ministers.

Preparatory work connected with the programme include, among other things, collecting opinions and proposals referring to projects of particular surveys, received not only from other governmental institutions, but also from, for example, trade unions and organizations of entrepreneurs. Central Statistical Office is obliged to prepare an answer to every proposal concerning modification of any survey, giving opinion whether it is possible to implement it or not.

Project of the programme is also available for the public on the website of the Office so that every citizen is informed about planned surveys for the coming year. Description of every planned survey included in the programme contains many details useful for future respondents (subject of the survey, statistical population covered by the survey, sources of data, methods of collecting the data, deadlines for submitting the data etc.).

### **III. Preparation of survey**

After the programme of surveys is signed by the Prime Minister, its official version is also exposed on the CSO website. Similar solution is used for templates of statistical questionnaires: templates (in the form of files in .pdf format) are displayed on the website in advance of the year in which surveys are conducted.

Templates are equipped with guidelines explaining in detail how to fill in the electronic questionnaire, information about dates of survey and direct links to the Reporting Portal - platform designed exclusively for the Central Statistical Office for the purpose of collecting statistical questionnaires from respondents via Internet.

As from 2009, only the smallest companies (with a number of employees up to 5) are allowed to deliver data on paper questionnaires, so the vast majority of respondents is obliged to fill in electronic questionnaires on screens of their computers, and then to send them online, with the use of the Reporting Portal. To date, about 800,000 user's accounts have been established on the Portal.

Access to the user's account on the Portal (secured by authentication data - login and password, unique for every user - respondent), can be easily achieved from the official website of the Office. The website contains also test version of the Portal, designed for beginners in order to explain them how to establish an account, how to report and so on.

Preparatory work connected with particular survey include, among others, informing respondents about their statistical obligations. Companies participating in the survey are informed in advance (as a rule, a few days before the start of the survey):

- in the form of an e-mail sent automatically by the Reporting Portal (in case of respondents reporting by Internet and having accounts on the Reporting Portal). It is worth pointing out that after logging-in to their accounts, respondents are informed not only about current statistical obligation, but also about the next surveys in which they are obliged to participate during the current year. Lists of these obligations are prepared for every respondent at the beginning of every year,
- on paper (in case of respondents that don't use the Reporting Portal and companies which take part in statistical surveys for the first time).

Letter informing about statistical obligation is usually composed of several typical elements: symbol and title of the statistical questionnaire, legal basis of the statistical survey, name of the statistical office responsible for the survey, deadline for submitting the data.

Typical letter of this kind contains also link to publications from the area of statistics connected with the survey, in order to present the purpose for collecting the data and therefore to encourage respondents to take part in the survey.

Paper letters for respondents which have never participated in any survey so far, always include temporary authentication data that enables establishing an account on the Reporting Portal.

#### **IV. During survey**

It must be emphasized that the Reporting Portal of the Central Statistical Office is used not only as a platform for collecting statistical data online, but also serves as the biggest channel of two-way communication between respondents and statisticians.

This two-way communication means that respondent not only receive announcement and letters from statisticians, but in case of any problem connected with a survey, respondent can ask statisticians for help.

In the event that statistical questionnaire seems to be too difficult to fill in, and guidelines attached to the questionnaire are not precise enough to avoid some additional questions, respondent may consult the staff of a statistical office, due to its specialization, by sending an e-mail or making a phone call. The staff is obliged to support him.

Lists of employees of statistical offices responsible for help in the process of filling-in particular questionnaires (along with their phone numbers and e-mail addresses), are available on the CSO website.

Specialization of particular employees (obliged not only to be familiar with methodological issues connected with the survey, but also ready to help particular respondent from the very beginning to the end of the process of reporting) reflects specialized tasks of their statistical offices, connected with particular areas of statistics.

Another help-desk was organized for users of the Reporting Portal having technical problems, for example with logging-in, lost authentication data.

In such cases, it is also possible to use the statistical helpline, with the same phone number for entire country. A user is then redirected to a member of staff of the regional statistical office appropriate for his location.

Moreover, some guidelines and instructions concerning selected issues connected with the Reporting Portal (short guidebook for users, information about procedure applicable in case of lost of the authentication data etc.) as well as announcements and messages about recent changes connected with the Portal are available for users on the website of the Portal.

Users of the Reporting Portal receive also another messages, such as information about forthcoming deadline for submitting the data (sent a few days before the date specified in the programme of surveys, to those who haven't already submitted the data).

If a respondent misses the deadline, another kind of notification is sent to his or her account.

Respondents reporting on paper, receive paper admonition letters or phone calls made by the personnel of statistical offices in order to encourage them to submit the outstanding data and to offer some help.

Respondents especially reluctant to fulfill their statistical obligations, can receive admonition letter more than once. Paper letter always contains invitation to establish an account on the Reporting Portal and to report online.

Contacts between statisticians and respondents during the survey are not only limited to looking for solutions to technical and organizational problems.

The Central Statistical Office of Poland pay particular attention to the quality of data collected in the process of the survey. To this end, correctness and completeness of data are thoroughly controlled on different stages of collecting and processing of this data. Communication with respondents means, in this case, finding every potential error made by respondent during filling-in the statistical questionnaire, and giving him or her detailed guidelines to correct this error.

For electronic questionnaires collected by the Reporting Portal, this process begins on the user's screen: every IT system connected with the questionnaire is designed in a way that enables making a simple logical and mathematical control of data already put into the questionnaire. This control takes place in the process of filling-in the questionnaire, and list of errors is displayed on the screen so that it can be corrected by respondent before the questionnaire is accepted by the system. In other words, it's impossible for respondent to send the questionnaire containing simple logical or calculation errors.

To avoid mistakes, respondent is given instructions during filling-in the questionnaire: bubble containing guidelines connected with particular part of the questionnaire appears on the screen every time respondent indicates this part of questionnaire.

As a result of this control, it was possible to eliminate numerous phone and e-mail contacts between statisticians and respondents at this stage of the survey. On the other hand, this kind of control is focused only on very simple errors, easy to check and correct. Longer and more advanced error check could discourage respondent from filling-in the questionnaire, therefore the most complex and comprehensive control of data takes place after all the questionnaires are collected, i.e. during the data-processing. Potential error or lack of necessary data on the questionnaire often results in direct contacts (in the form of phones calls or e-mails) between the staff of appropriate statistical office and respondents.

## **V. Another areas of communication**

Communication between respondents and the official statistics in Poland include also correspondence concerning topics not directly connected with particular activities or particular problems that occurred during the survey, but more general in nature. Headquarters of the Central Statistical Office in Warsaw, as well as regional statistical offices, receive thousands of letters (and phone calls) from companies and individuals that include numerous questions concerning statistical obligations and statistics in general.

Typical questions refer to problems like: reasons for statistical obligations, aims of conducting statistical surveys, confidentiality of data. Statistical offices are obliged to answer the letters before the deadline set out for letters handled by civil servants in the Polish Code of Administrative Proceedings.

Every answer gives a detailed explanation of a particular problem, with obligatory quotation of a legal basis appropriate for this problem. Apart from explanation of the purpose for collecting the data, numerous letters to respondents emphasize the importance of every respondent and his or her contribution to the statistical information system. As a rule, letters intended for the Central Statistical Office are answered by the Programming and Coordination of Statistical Surveys Department (in case of any methodological question connected with any particular survey, answer is prepared in cooperation with department responsible for the particular area of statistics).

## **VI. Concluding remarks**

Recent modernization of the Polish statistical system had a huge impact on interactions between statisticians and respondents. The Reporting Portal of the Central Statistical Office revolutionized organization of surveys and, in consequence, changed the way of communication with companies participating in surveys.

First of all, those changes affected methods of communication (e-mail messages delivered directly to respondents instead of paper letters sent by mail). As a result, contacts with respondents are now much more intensive, compared to the period preceding the start of online reporting. But, what is even more important, one-way communication (announcements and instructions given to respondents) is being gradually replaced by two-way communication, in which a respondent can ask a statistician any question and anytime and is given an answer. This kind of communication gives a respondent an opportunity to participate fully in a survey and to become a real partner for the official statistics.

The experience gained during surveys will be used in a communication strategy which is currently under preparation for upcoming rounds of censuses 2020.