Response Burden Management for Business Surveys at Statistics Netherlands

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Abstract

Statistics Netherlands has actively worked on managing response burden in business surveys since the early 1990s. In the first decades the focus was mainly on reducing actual burden (i.e. time and /or money spent by businesses on statistical reporting). More recently, response burden management has also explicitly focused on business respondents' perception of their experience with the survey request, the perceived response burden. To further streamline and stimulate response burden management, the tasks have grown over the years, the formal position of response burden coordinator had been established in 2014.

This paper describes the response burden on businesses caused by Statistics Netherlands, the legal context for response burden management in business surveys and the main bodies and procedures that have been established for this at Statistics Netherlands. Response burden management is illustrated by examples of the main recent projects related to response burden. The paper is concluded by a description of response burden management plans for the near future.

Key Words: Actual burden, perceived burden, official statistics

1. Response burden on businesses caused by Statistics Netherlands

1.1 Actual burden

Statistics Netherlands (SN) has worked at reducing actual business response burden (i.e. time and/or money spent by businesses on statistical reporting) for more than twenty years. As can be seen in Figure 1, this has resulted in the reduction of response burden (as expressed in euros) of about 70% during the period 1994 -2014. Recent response burden management projects have contributed to these reductions. This has also been noticed by two independent sources outside SN. The recent Eurostat peer review on SN states: *"…SN also proactively communicates with the respondents to its direct surveys and takes appropriate steps to minimise the actual burden placed on them. In its communications with respondents SN pays particular attention to addressing the gap between the "perceived" burden of statistical surveys and the actual burden. In the meeting with the main data providers, the efforts of SN in minimising the response burden were fully recognised and highly praised by all participants. …"* (O'Hanlon, Szép and Smrekar, 2015, p. 11). In 2015 SN has won the Public Sector Award (Beste Overheidsorganisatie

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van het Jaar, 2015). The report of the jury states: *"...SN succeeds in realizing cost efficiency for businesses, persons and governmental organizations..."*.

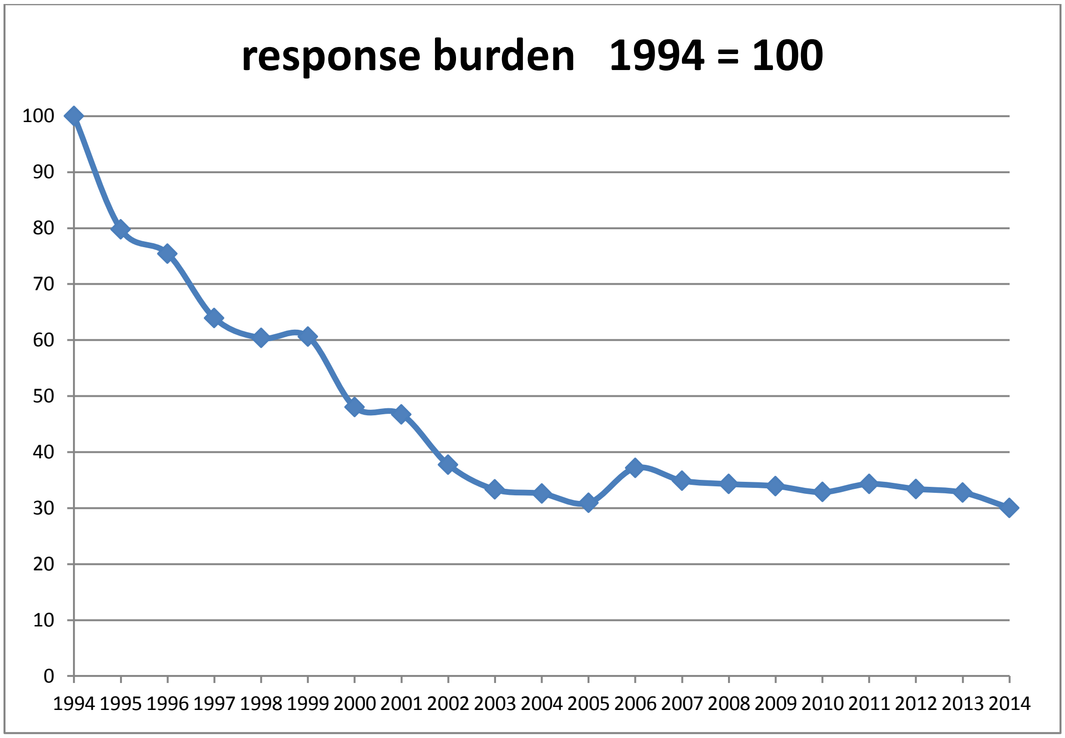

Figure 1: Development of actual burden on businesses caused by SN (measured in euros) 1994-2014

1.2 Perceived burden

SN does not have an indicator of the overall perceived burden (i.e. respondents' perception of their experience with the survey request) of business survey respondents. However, as part of the regular Customer Satisfaction Survey, some aspects of perceived burden have been assessed annually for both respondents and non-respondents of the Survey on International Trade in Goods since 2007 (van der Werf 2015). The results however, do not provide any indication of clear trends in the period 2007-2015. The overall rating of appreciation of SN (on a 1-10 scale; corresponding to the Dutch system of grading in schools, where a grade lower than 6 is "not satisfactory") has been remarkably stable over time, ranging between a 7,0 and 7,1 for respondents and between 6,5 and 6,8 for non-respondents. There have been some fluctuations in the other measures, but these were always difficult to explain by specific actions taken. The percentage of respondents that considers completing the questionnaire "little work" ranges from 40% (in 2007) to 50% (in 2011) and was measured at 43% in 2015. The percentage that considers providing the data "easy" ranges between 74% (in 2015) and 82% (in 2011). The percentage of respondents who say that SN explains clearly why data are asked, ranges between 63% (in 2008) and 74% (in 2011) and was 70% in 2015. Non-respondents are always more critical about this. For this group the percentage who agrees that the reason for the data collection is well enough explained by SN, ranges from 56% (in 2008) to 64% (in 2015). This lack of clear patterns in the perceived burden measurements may be partly caused by the fact that the threshold for reporting for Intrastat has changed from year to year (in order to impose a minimum response burden), which meant that the composition of the population of respondents to this Customer Satisfaction Survey has changed accordingly.

The next section provides an overview of the context of response burden management at SN. The implementation of these regulations and policy goals has resulted in a number of bodies and procedures which shape the response burden management at SN. The third section of this paper provides an overview of these bodies and procedures. The fourth section describes several examples of recent SN projects relevant for response burden management. Section five concludes with plans for the future regarding response burden management.

2. The context for response burden management at SN

Several important guidelines for the work of SN create the context for how response burden is managed at SN. First of all, the Statistics Netherlands Act of 20 November 2003, which provides the legal basis for the work of SN, declares that SN has the right and the obligation to use register data for the production of statistics. Only if data are not available in registers, data collection is allowed. Furthermore, section 36 states : "… the director general shall ensure that data are acquired in such a way as to minimise the ensuing administrative burden for companies, independent professionals and institutions as well as legal persons whose object according to their articles of association is to represent the interests of the companies, independent professionals and institutions concerned."

In 2004 SN became a Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisation; an autonomous legal authority, under the political responsibility of the Minister of Economic Affairs. SN reports annually about a number of key performance indicators. One of the indicators concerns the total burden (in euros) caused by mandatory statistics. The target and realised values are published in the annual report (e.g. Statistics Netherlands 2014). Another indicator related to response burden is the general satisfaction about SN of, among others, (non)respondents to business surveys.

The international guidelines to which SN adheres also, address the topic of response burden. The Ninth Principle of the European Statistics Code of Practice specifies that "the statistical authority monitors the response burden and sets targets for its reduction over time" (European Commission 2011). The Fifth Principle of the United Nations' Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (United Nations 2014) states that data source should be selected "with regard to quality, timeliness, costs and the burden on respondents."

Next to this, there have been several EU and related national burden reduction programmes which have resulted in burden reduction goals for SN. Currently, EU burden reduction is part of the Regulatory Fitness and Performance Programme (European Commission 2015a, 2015b). The current national burden reduction programme in the Netherlands runs from 2012-2017 and states, next to reduction in the overall burden in euros, also ambitions regarding the perceived burden and the quality of service provided by the government to businesses.

3. Main bodies and procedures for response burden management at SN

3.1 Outside SN

3.1.1 Respondent Advisory Board (meets twice a year)

SN co-operates closely with four chairs of trade organizations and four directors of companies in a Respondents' advisory board. The SN members of this board are the director of "Economic and business statistics and national accounts", the deputy director of "Data collection" and the Response Burden Coordinator. This board advises SN on all respondent related topics and keeps SN sensitive to the respondent view on respondent related processes and proposed innovations. This input facilitates a further internalization of a respondent focused mind set at SN.

3.1.2 Meeting of Intergovernmental Administrative Burden Coordinators (meets monthly)

All governmental departments in the Netherlands have an Administrative Burden Coordinator controlling all aspects on administrative burden related to both current and new legislation. In an intergovernmental meeting of the Administrative Burden Coordinators of all governmental departments, the proceeding of the burden reduction is discussed and best practices and lessons learned are shared. These meetings facilitate knowledge sharing and innovation. The meeting has rotating presidency from the two departments responsible for the reduction of the overall administrative burden in the Netherlands.

3.2 Inside SN

3.2.1 Program Steering Group on respondents (meets every six weeks)

Obviously, managing response burden may sometimes be at odds with two other important organizational goals: publishing high quality statistics and working efficiently. Moreover, managing response burden involves all five SN divisions: "Economic and business statistics and national accounts" and "Socio-economic and spatial statistics" are responsible for producing high quality statistics. In case the required input cannot be collected through administrative data, data collection is required. The division "Data collection" is responsible for collecting the required data efficiently. "Corporate services, IT and methodology" facilitates all respondent related aspects from data collection methods and systems to the most state-of-the-art estimation methods and finally, "CBS Communication and news" is responsible for the communication of our statistical output and supports in respondent related communication. To facilitate SN wide response burden management, all five divisions collaborate in the Programme Steering Group on Respondents. In this steering group all main respondent related policies are discussed, best practices and lessons learned are shared and respondent-related projects are monitored. This SN wide steering group is very helpful in the further realization of innovative activities to reduce both actual and perceived response burden.

3.2.2 Response Burden Coordinator

Although in fact response burden coordination has been done for several years, this was never defined as a formal role within SN. However, in 2014 the formal position of Response Burden Coordinator has been established at SN. The coordinator is placed at the division "Economic and business statistics and national accounts", monitors the actual and the perceived response burden and is SN wide the central point-of-contact for all response burden related aspects. The coordinator stimulates and facilitates the process of making SN more respondent-focused throughout all phases of the statistical production process. The coordinator is secretary of both the Respondent Advisory Board and the

Programme Steering Group on Respondents. The coordinator acts as a liaison officer and works with SN account managers in strengthening the contacts with trade organizations, and facilitates interchange of information, experiences and best-practices between data collectors, statisticians and methodologists.

3.2.3 Account managers for the top-300 Enterprise Groups

For the 300 largest enterprise groups (EGs), selected because of their size and complexity, five account managers are the single point of contact responsible for maintaining the relations with the EG, profiling the structures in the business register, processing of the micro data and eventually for delivering consistent micro data to the statistical departments (Vennix 2012). This results in solving a number of inconsistencies in the data for these enterprise groups, improving the quality of the business statistics and the national accounts. Enterprise groups are generally cooperative and willing to supply the information that is necessary to solve or explain inconsistencies. It turns out that they appreciate that their data are treated seriously and thoroughly by SN and also that they can discuss matters with a counterpart with an appropriate level of knowledge and understanding. By documenting the conclusions after dealing with an inconsistency, either if it was solved or explained, the knowledge obtained by account managers and analysts is filed. In this way the information can be shared not only within the unit for large enterprise groups, but also with the statistical departments receiving the micro data and with the enterprise groups themselves. The latter should help to assure that inconsistencies that are solved once will not re-occur in the next reference period. A good knowledge of these largest enterprise groups and good relationships with them not only help to improve the data on them, but can also facilitate the introduction of new surveys or of new concepts for existing surveys e.g. by creating a better agreement with the internal accounting of the Dutch enterprises, contributing to a reduction of the response burden.

3.2.4 Team for data providers contact in data collection division

Within the data collection division a team has been established in 2015 in which all respondent contacts at the division of data collection are organised. Part of this team are:

- A central (general) helpdesk for respondents;
- A specialized technical helpdesk for respondents;
- The handling of complaints from respondents;
- The expertise on communication with respondents;
- The expertise on training of interviewers and helpdesk staff.

Incorporating these specialisms in one team aims to stimulate coordinated handling of the communication with respondents with questions or complaints and helps SN to further improve the respondent contacts. In an annual report this team reflects on the questions and complaints and on the improvements it triggered for both the helpdesk and the communication strategy.

3.2.5 Data collection methodology / Questionnaire Laboratory

The Questionnaire Laboratory at SN is part of the Methodology department and specializes in pretesting and evaluating questionnaires. The choice of the methods used depends on a number of factors, such as the time available, whether it is a new or an existing survey and whether there are any known problems in the data collection. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. Typically, on-site visits where the response process of actual respondents is studied in detail are used in the process of developing new or redesigning existent questionnaires. One of the central questions when evaluating questionnaires with respondents is always if there are any questionnaire characteristics that cause a high response burden and if so, how this could be resolved. (See Giesen (2007) and Giesen, Meertens, Vis- Visschers and Beukenhorst (2010) for more details on the methods used for testing and evaluating questionnaires at SN. For a general discussion on business survey pretesting and evaluation methods we refer to Willimack, 2013). In 2013, a new redesign approach was developed as part of the redesign of the Survey of Road Freight Transport. This so called ‘show case’ approach was part of the “Perception of Burden project” (Giesen and Berkenbosch 2013). In this approach a multi-disciplinary team from SN cooperated with businesses and business organisations to discuss how the design of this survey should be improved in order to reduce both actual and perceived burden. What was new for SN in this approach was that much effort was put not only in listening to respondents, but also in the contacts with the trade organisations regarding a specific survey and in an active communication about this. This resulted, among others, in positive publications about the redesign project in trade journals. SN now incorporates this approach – where possible – in all projects that involve a (re)design of business surveys.

3.2.6 Data collection strategy

The legal requirements regarding data collection from the Statistics Netherlands Act have been implemented with the SN data collection strategy (Hermans, Snijkers and Roos 2011). This strategy dictates that SN should use register data where possible and if primary data are collected should use (in this order) Electronic Data Interchange (e.g. XBRL), web surveys, paper, CATI and CAPI (see also Snijkers, Göttgens and Hermans 2011).

SN has invested heavily in using secondary data (e.g. Zwijnenburg 2012), including management of the quality of that data (e.g. Daas and Arend-Tóth 2012). A system of base registers has been developed to facilitate the use of these data. The aim of this system is to facilitate the principle of single filing of information by individuals, companies, and institutions and the multiple use of this information by government institutions. This system of base registers provides high quality and inter-linked registers. For the remaining data collection for almost all business survey questionnaires are now available as on-line questionnaire and most respondents use this mode.

3.2.7 Sample coordination and survey holidays

Currently, the sampling for 13 different business surveys is done via a centralised system. This system allows the coordination of sampling and the assignment of ‘survey holidays’ for several surveys at the same time. The purpose of this system is a more even distribution of the response burden over businesses over time. Recently methodology has been developed to further use this system, combining both panel and non-panel surveys (Boonstra and Smeets, 2015).

3.2.8 Measurement of actual and perceived response burden

SN has measured actual response burden in terms of time and money spent for mandatory surveys since the early 1990s. Time needed for reporting is estimated based on respondents’ answers to a question about the total time spent by the organization to comply with the data request. This question is periodically added to questionnaires. A total response burden per survey is calculated both in euros and minutes based on this mean time in minutes, the total number of returned questionnaires and an average wage rate.

Perceived burden is monitored as part of the annual Customer Satisfaction Survey among (non)respondents to business surveys (Beukenhorst, Israëls, Kroeze, Riele and de Vree 2005). Since 2007 (non)respondents to the Survey on International Trade in Goods have been interviewed for this Customer Satisfaction Survey. The Survey on International Trade in Goods causes half of the total SN response burden. Perceived burden is measured with two questions in this CATI questionnaire. The first question assesses *perceived cognitive burden* by asking respondents whether they thought answering the questions is 'easy', 'neither easy, nor difficult' or 'difficult'. The second question assesses *perceived time burden* by asking whether respondents found answering the questions was 'much work', 'neither much, nor little work' or 'little work'. These measurements of perceived burden are based on the recommendations in the Eurostat Handbook for Monitoring and Evaluating Business Survey Response Burdens (Dale and Haraldsen, 2007; see also Haraldsen, Jones, Giesen and Zhang 2013 for a discussion of the concept and measurement of response burden). Other indicators from this survey relevant for perceived burden are a question about how well SN explains why data are asked and a rating overall satisfaction with SN.

4. Examples of recent response burden management projects

4.1 Standard Business Reporting

In the Netherlands Standard Business Reporting has recently become the standard for the digital exchange of business reports (http://www.sbr-nl.nl/english-site). SBR enables Dutch businesses and their intermediaries to reduce administrative burden by simplifying the process of giving information from financial administrations to governmental organisations and banks. Information in financial administrations can be reused by using a reference ledger schedule ("ReferentieGrootboekSchema", RGS; see Buiten, van den Boom, Roos & Snijkers 2016). RGS has been developed by the SBR programme, a close cooperation of various market parties with the tax office, the Chambers of Commerce and SN. RGS facilitates businesses and intermediaries to reuse information by bridging the gap between the required information for (among others) tax office, statistical office and the respondent's bookkeeping system. For tax uses, businesses already send much required information by using SBR. For a number of SN surveys reporting via SBR is now possible.

4.2 Redesign Survey International Trade in Goods

As stated before, the Survey on International Trade in Goods (Intrastat) causes half of the total SN response burden. In 2015, two major changes in the data collection for this survey were implemented in order to reduce this burden: By using tax data and innovative statistical methodology nearly half to the Intrastat respondents are now given the option to report annually instead of monthly and a new online data collection tool was introduced to facilitate the reporting. This redesign was developed in close cooperation with respondents (Geurden-Slis, Giesen and Houben 2016).

4.3 Redesign of burden measurement system

The traditional SN measurement of actual response burden provides crucial information to monitor total response burden. However, these data do not allow insight in how burden is spread over businesses or specific subgroups. Examples from Statistics Canada (Seens 2010, 2013) and Statistics Sweden (Lorenc, Kloek, Abrahamsson, and Eckman 2013) have shown that such analyses can yield very interesting insights and ideas for further improvement of response burden management. Since data collection year 2014, a new system for monitoring the response burden has been developed which registers response burden at the level of the business and by mode of response. These data allow analyses of burden by mode, business, type of industry and size class.

5. Plans for near future

The overall response burden caused by SN is only a very small part of the total administrative burden in the Netherlands. In latest available measurements of total government burden, mandatory statistics were less than 0,25% of the total burden measured (Regiegroep regeldruk 2008). As the quality of our statistical products has to be guaranteed, large reductions in the total actual burden will be difficult to realize in the near future. However, SN will continue to look for opportunities to further reduce both the actual and the perceived burden. This will be done by continuous innovations in data collection, including looking for opportunities for a better distribution of the burden, by investing in the relationship with businesses in their role as data providers, and by improving the communication of the value of statistical output for businesses. In these various efforts we will keep an open dialogue with respondents, to make sure their point of view of where and how burden reductions can be made is taken into account.

5.1 More insight in actual burden by burden analyses

As described in section 4.3, the system for measuring actual response burden has recently been improved in order to allow assessment of burden on the level of the business unit. Analyzing these data still is a challenging task. We are still in the process of harmonizing and integrating the use of unit identification for our various business surveys. Now that we have one database with response burden at the business level, our first challenge is to develop a good methodology to combine the information from the various surveys. Once we have done this, we will be able to calculate several valuable indicators of how response burden is spread over businesses and over time. Following the examples from for example Statistics Canada (Seens 2010, 2013) and Statistics Sweden (Lorenc, Kloek, Abrahamsson and Eckman 2013) we plan to do the following analyses: describe the minimum, maximum and mean number of surveys and questionnaires (some surveys involve more than 1 questionnaire per year) to which businesses respond; the minimum, maximum and mean annual total time and euros spent reporting for SN; by size class and type of industry and related to the distribution in the Dutch economy. These analyses will help to see if and where there are “hot spots” in the response burden caused by SN and can help to further develop our response burden management policies.

5.2 Extending existing developments to reduce response burden

As described in section 4, SN has recently invested in innovative projects to reduce both actual and perceived response burden. These innovations will continue wherever we observe opportunities for further reductions. Especially the further implementation and promotion of the use of SBR seem like a promising avenue for further burden reduction.

A recent pilot with system-to-system messages will be continued with more software companies. SN is now also exploring how it can promote the use of SBR for statistical reporting by offering relevant statistical output. For the Survey on International Trade in Goods (Intrastat) SN will continue the dialogue with businesses to search for further opportunities to lower to the response burden.

5.3 Further improvement of communication

To reduce the perceived burden, SN will further improve the communication with businesses in their combined roles of both respondents and (potential) customers of our statistical output. SN aims to improve the experienced "what's in it for me" value for businesses, by investing in the development and attractive presentation of statistical output that is relevant for businesses. Communication will be done by direct mailings to certain subgroups (for example for businesses who are asked to supply data for Intrastat) and via various content on a dedicated part of the SN website and the government wide website for businesses "Ondernemersplein.nl".

Further reduction of response burden can only be achieved in co-creation with the businesses and trade organisations. The dialogue between SN and the businesses will continue and will further explore tangible improvements for specific surveys. This business centered approach will not be a project on itself but is a way of working that SN will incorporate further.

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