

# The Role of Behavioral Survey Methodologists in National Statistical Agencies

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## Introductory Comments

The International Association of Survey Statisticians (IASS) was invited to arrange a session at the 1997 Joint Section Meetings of the American Statistical Association. As the then President of the IASS, I was invited to organise and chair the session. The topic chosen was “The Role of Behavioral Survey Methodologists in National Statistical Agencies”.

Don Dillman (Washington State University) was the keynote speaker. A major theme of his paper was to contrast the error reduction (i.e. through effective survey design) and postsurvey adjustment perspectives. A revised version of his paper follows.

The discussion was lively with many different views expressed. The comments of three of the invited discussants follow, namely David Binder (Statistics Canada), Lars Lyberg (Statistics Sweden) and Cynthia Clark (US Bureau of the Census).

All speakers agreed that survey methodologists are essential to the well-being of a national statistical agency. However, their effectiveness varies from organisation to organisation. To a large extent this depends on the culture of the national statistical agency and the support survey methodologists receive from senior management.

I will conclude my opening comments with a brief outline of the arrangements for survey methodologists in the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

1. They are organisationally located in a separate functionally specialised units. (Survey methodologists are also located in a different unit to the sampling methodologists but they work closely and are located in the same Division.) This is to provide the required critical mass and to support the cross-fertilisation of experience and ideas that is so necessary for a strong methodology group.
2. One of the key performance measures for the senior members of the survey methodology group is to ensure there is a good working relationship with client areas. There are regular meetings with the senior staff of client areas to review key issues, work programs, etc.
3. There is an unwritten law—specialist methodology services must be used in survey development work. In practice, it does not matter. Their services are eagerly sought because their services are highly valued.
4. Standards for survey and questionnaire development have been promulgated and accepted as the way we do business in the ABS.
5. Strong leadership and support for methodology is provided from the very top. This is not hard as many of the most senior ABS staff started their careers in the methodology unit.
6. In other words, survey methodologists are regarded as very much part of the ABS team. They provide genuine leadership to the way we do statistical work. It is one of the main reasons that the ABS has an excellent reputation within Australia.