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Topic (ii): How to decide which stories to tell and to ensure they are of high quality

Disseminating Bureau of Labor Statistics Data

Supporting Paper

Submitted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics¹

Introduction

1. The mission of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) is to serve as the principal fact-finding agency for the U.S. Federal Government in the broad field of labor economics and statistics. BLS is an independent national statistical agency that collects, processes, analyzes, and disseminates essential statistical data to the American public, the U.S. Congress, other Federal agencies, State and local governments, business, and labor. The BLS also serves as a statistical resource to the Department of Labor (DOL).
2. In this paper, I will discuss the guidelines BLS follows to ensure the quality of its data. I will also identify some of the groups that BLS receives input for its products and services, and briefly describe the Bureau's dissemination practices.

Data Quality Guidelines

3. BLS data must satisfy a number of criteria: relevance to current social and economic issues; timeliness in reflecting today's rapidly changing economic conditions; accuracy and consistently high statistical quality; and impartiality in both subject matter and presentation.
4. As part of the Department of Labor (DOL), BLS follows DOL's information quality guidelines, as well as the guidelines issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to ensure that the information disseminated by a Federal

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agency like BLS is of the highest level of quality, integrity, and impartiality. BLS is also a member of the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy and is active with other statistical organizations to ensure data quality.

5. Further, BLS also adheres to the statistical data quality principles provided under the guidance of the Office of Management and Budget, as well as the National Research Council's Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency. Moreover, all BLS information products are subjected to a multi-stage review before they are disseminated to the public.
6. The Bureau works with other Federal, State, and international statistical agencies to coordinate methodologies, reduce and avoid duplication, improve communication, increase compatibility of data, and increase cooperative and collaborative efforts.
7. BLS has established cooperative agreements with other Federal agencies, such as the Census Bureau, as well as State agencies to collect, analyze, and publish a variety of labor market information. There are a series of contracts between the State Employment Security Agencies and BLS for the collection and sharing of Labor Market Information. Individual States also publish data from the occupational safety and health programs developed in cooperation with BLS. The confidentiality of the information that respondents furnish is protected. Assuring that no individual or establishment respondent can be identified.

The Important Role of Stakeholder Input

8. BLS works collegially with its stakeholders. Stakeholders play a critical role in ensuring the quality and impartiality of BLS information and dissemination practices. These stakeholders include those involved in establishing statistical policy and methodology as well as survey respondents, data users such as the public and the news media, and other federal statistical agencies. In addition to formal advisory councils from the business, labor, and academic communities, BLS fosters ongoing discussions about its products and services with the public.
9. An important component to stakeholder input is keeping our users informed about our information quality, techniques, and methodology. We publish analysis by various means so that our users can best understand not only what is being presented, but also the limitations of the data. BLS also provides descriptions of the methods and procedures we use to develop and produce our statistical products and prepare these descriptions at various levels of complexity and comprehensiveness to address the wide range of user needs.
10. We usually provide this information by including technical notes with each news release. BLS also publishes a Handbook of Methods which covers most major programs and is updated every few years. It also includes detailed information on how BLS collects, analyzes and disseminates survey data.

Examples of How BLS Seeks and Utilizes Stakeholder Input

11. There are several examples of how BLS values the importance of stakeholder input on the quality of our data products, and how we are striving to specifically address the needs of the news media.
12. One example was the redesign of our web site in 2000. BLS was one of the first federal agencies to make its data available via the Internet. However, the original website design was difficult to navigate because it was organized by BLS program and utilized “BLS-Speak,” or terminology not commonly used by the general public.
13. BLS conducted several rounds of website usability testing and arranged the site topically, using terms more common to the general public. BLS invited data users, librarians, members of its advisory councils, and the media to test several versions of website redesigns.
14. As a result, several new features and other enhancements were added, including data retrieval tools. Every page on our website now has a link to a subject matter contact, a technical contact, and a general feedback contact. We created one-page overviews to help data users quickly read about each of our programs. We added “People are Asking” boxes not only to our homepage, but to each program page to highlight not only frequently asked questions, but to address recent events that may have an affect on the program’s data. For example, one of the “People are Asking” questions addressed the effect of the September 11th terrorist attacks on BLS data.
15. Stakeholder input prompted us to create a webpage specifically for the news media called, “The Editor’s Desk” (TED). Each business day, the TED page posts new information from a BLS program, focusing on one or two specific points of a BLS report (rather than presenting a lengthy general summary) and providing highlights of intriguing BLS data. The webpage also provides links to further analysis at the bottom of each story. (See Appendix) The TED page is also very useful as another means for announcing new data series.
16. Stakeholder input also resulted in the Bureau’s introduction of new data series such as the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) and the Business Employment Dynamics series.
17. JOLTS yields a measure of excess labor demand, the job openings rate serves as a key economic indicator comparable to the best-known existing measure of excess labor supply, the unemployment rate. The job openings rate, together with measures of hires and separations by broad industry group, will provide new insight into the changing economy and help with detecting pressures on wage rates.

18. The Business Employment Dynamics consists of a quarterly series of statistics on gross job gains and gross job losses. Gross job gains and gross job losses reveal some aspects of business dynamics, including establishment openings and closings and establishment expansions and contractions.
19. We also collaborate with other federal statistical agencies to conduct special surveys to examine specific labor issues. For example, we produced estimates for the nation and by industry of respirator use and practices among private establishments in the U.S in the Survey of Respirator Use and Practices. This BLS survey was a joint project with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and DOL's Occupational Safety and Health Administration.
20. Further, the Bureau conducts media briefings to announce any new data series, major changes, or significant findings. Media briefings are held in the National office and throughout the country by the BLS regional Economic Analysis and Information (EA&I) office. The EA&I offices hold open houses and media briefings to announce the release of survey data, new publications, Web site redesigns, or any new BLS products or concepts. These open houses can be open to the press and the public. Sometimes EA&I offices hold a combination media briefing and an open house, permitting a synergy between the two. The presence of data users creates an event for the media to cover, and provides the press with real data users to film, photograph, and interview.

BLS Dissemination Practices

21. In accordance with the OMB Directive Number 3, and the Principles and Practices of a Federal Statistical Agency, the Bureau promptly releases its data so that the interval between the period to which the data or estimates refer, and the date they are actually released to the public, is as short as possible.
22. Each year, the Bureau provides the schedule of when its principle economic indicators will be released in the upcoming year. Also, each release announces the time and date of the next release. We also announce any planned changes in data collection, analysis, or estimation methods that may affect the interpretation of a principal economic indicator as far in advance of the change as possible.
23. BLS releases its data in various formats to best meet the needs of our customers. BLS information can be accessed from our website, via email, over the telephone which includes the Integrated Voice Response (IVR) and Fax-on-Demand systems, and in print. In addition, BLS offers an email subscription service in which customers can have news releases, data tables, and other documents sent directly to them via email as soon as they are available to the public.
24. We also offer our customers contact with specialists who can answer technical questions about specific information both electronically and personally. Further,

we provide information at conferences sponsored by BLS and other associations through exhibits and lectures.

