

A new vision on primary data collection from businesses: “naturally relevant”

Robert Nieuwenhuijs; Leanne Houben; Ger Snijkers (Statistics Netherlands)

r.nieuwenhuijs@cbs.nl, apm.houben@cbs.nl; g.snijkers@cbs.nl;

Abstract

Since its foundation in 1899, Statistics Netherlands has been asking businesses to help achieve its mission: to publish reliable and coherent statistical information. By means of surveys businesses report to Statistics Netherlands about their operations. Participating in these surveys is not optional for businesses: by law they are obliged to supply data to Statistics Netherlands, provided that these data cannot be obtained from administrative sources such as government registers. Although this seems to be the end of the story from a legal point of view, this obligation is often a burden for businesses. Reducing response burden is therefore a high priority for Statistics Netherlands. A new vision on business primary data collection has been developed to reduce response burden for businesses whilst maintaining quality standards.

Under the new vision, Statistics Netherlands aims to realize its information needs from businesses in a manner that is predictable and self-evident from the perspective of the business. The new vision is based on the following three pillars:

1. **Businesses first:** a shift in perspective, whereby the entire data collection process is designed and implemented from the perspective of the business
2. **A matter of course (self-evident):** Statistics Netherlands is transparent in what businesses can expect from us.
3. **Reuse of data:** data will be retrieved from business systems automatically and in a timely manner by Statistics Netherlands with minimal interference from the business.

This vision was developed by an interdisciplinary team of researchers at Statistics Netherlands through a dialogue with businesses and sector organisations. Initial responses to the new vision have been positive. During this presentation we will further elaborate on the content of vision. We will also demonstrate how we are working towards achieving the vision by engaging businesses and staff at Statistics Netherlands in the implementation of the vision.

Background

Since its foundation in 1899, Statistics Netherlands has been asking businesses to help achieve its mission: to publish reliable and coherent statistical information. Where information cannot be obtained through other means (such as government registers), businesses report about their operations through surveys. Participating in these surveys is not optional for businesses: they are obliged by law to complete these surveys for Statistics Netherlands. Although this seems to be the end of the story from a legal point of view, this obligation is often a burden for businesses. Reducing response burden is therefore a high priority for Statistics Netherlands.

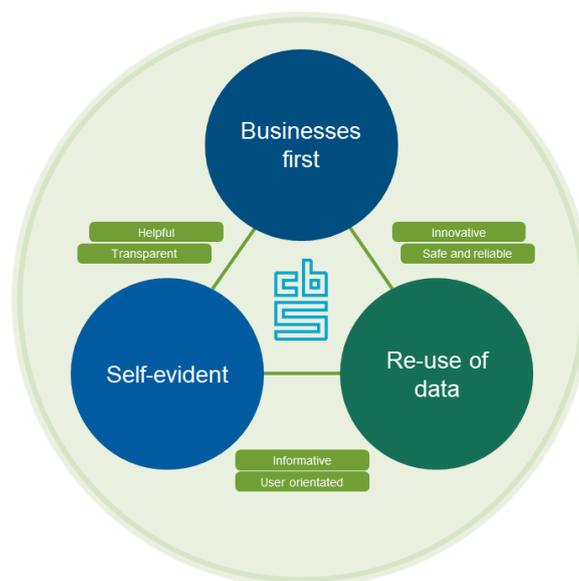
In order to make it as easy as possible for businesses to submit data, Statistics Netherlands has set seven ambitions to reduce the response burden. These ambitions are laid out in the Position Paper 'Focus on the Reporting Business' (multi-year plan, reduction response burden 2021-2023). One of these ambitions is to develop a new vision on primary data collection to reduce response burden for businesses whilst maintaining quality standards¹. This paper will further elaborate on the content of the vision and explain how we are working towards achieving the vision by engaging businesses and staff at Statistics Netherlands in its implementation.

A new vision on primary data collection from businesses: “naturally relevant”

According to the new vision, Statistics Netherlands aims to realize its information needs from businesses in a manner that is predictable and self-evident from the perspective of the business. The new vision is based on the following three pillars:

1. **Businesses first**: a shift in perspective, whereby the entire data collection process is designed and implemented from the perspective of the business
2. **Self-evident**: Statistics Netherlands is transparent and predictable in what businesses can expect from us.
3. **Reuse of data**: data will be retrieved from business systems automatically and in a timely manner by Statistics Netherlands with minimal interference from the business.

The vision is summarised visually below:



¹ The other ambitions will be discussed in a separate session during this meeting (Reduction of Response Burden for Individual Businesses, Leanne Houben).

Pillar 1: Businesses first

Statistics Netherlands has a national and international obligation to produce high-quality statistics, but this task cannot ignore the burden it places on businesses. Up to now surveys have mainly been designed from a statistical perspective in order to meet output obligations. The result is that surveys often do not sufficiently link up with information chains, procedures and concepts of the businesses themselves.

Changing this requires a new way of working and a new mindset. Fundamental to this is a shift in perspective, whereby the entire data collection process is designed and implemented from the perspective of the business. The relationship between statistical output and data collection is therefore different: the reality of Statistics Netherlands will no longer stand above the reality of the business. An important element of this is providing businesses with the opportunity to decide which information they would like to receive periodically in return from Statistics Netherlands.

Pillar 2: Self-evident

Requests from Statistics Netherlands to participate in a business survey are often unexpected. This is for two reasons: Firstly, (especially for smaller and newer businesses) because they are not aware of the legal obligation of businesses to fill in surveys of Statistics Netherlands. Secondly, because from the business perspective there is no logic as to when they will or will not be asked to complete a survey. From the perspective of the business, they can receive a letter at any time, and then after years of delivering data, such an invitation can also suddenly no longer arrive. This means that a business cannot anticipate this in terms of the organization of its administration or the capacity required to meet the requested obligations. In short, this is not a matter of course for a business.

In the future, all businesses with similar characteristics will have the same obligations. It is also clear in advance how the obligations for a business will change as the business changes (for example if it grows or changes its SBI), and the business can anticipate this when setting up its systems. This means that Statistics Netherlands is transparent in what businesses can expect from us. The current separate surveys no longer exist, but are integrated into a coherent system of data flows from the business to Statistics Netherlands and back.

Pillar 3: Re-use of data

A common objection made by businesses supplying data is that the data already exist in their own systems, or have already been supplied to other agencies. A common reaction is: "why do I have to retype all this information?" Or, "go get the data yourself; they already have my data over there." In addition, businesses sometimes have to report almost the same data several times, but in a slightly different way.

In addition to informing the business of its obligations at an early stage, the CBS will focus on obtaining the required data through a Business' standard accounting and other standard systems. Because businesses know in advance what data they have to report to the CBS, it is possible to embed this in the foundation of the accounting and other systems. Data will be retrieved automatically and in a timely manner by Statistics Netherlands with minimal interference from the business. The obligation towards Statistics Netherlands will then no longer feel like an additional burden, but will be part of standard business operations; a matter of course.

From vision to reality

The vision was developed by an interdisciplinary team of researchers at Statistics Netherlands through a dialogue with businesses and sector organisations. Initial response to the new vision has been positive: senior management of Statistics Netherlands has embraced the vision and sector organisations are also eager to work

together with Statistics Netherlands to realise it. There are currently three areas in which we are working towards the vision:

1. The promotion of “Business first” as a guiding theme (*leitmotif*) for setting priorities and informing decisions. In order to support this we are developing a ‘customer journey map’, where (from the perspective of the business) touchpoints with Statistics Netherlands and the corresponding values and priorities for business are identified. This customer journey map will be developed in collaboration with businesses and staff at Statistics Netherlands.
2. Continue and expand current initiatives: the new vision is a natural result of innovations in business data collection currently taking place at Statistics Netherlands. We will continue to communicate and expand on these initiatives. These include the projects on the automatic collection of financial data from businesses for the SBS questionnaire², the Business Portal³ and automatic data collection for an agricultural survey.⁴
3. New ideas and experimentation: we will be conducting experiments and proofs of concept (PoCs), in collaboration with sector organisations and businesses, whereby ‘low hanging fruit’ and innovative ideas are tested. The customer journey map discussed above will provide a framework for a dialog with stakeholders for identifying areas of improvement. Additionally we will be conducting research on the systems and processes used by businesses to identify potential areas for collaboration. The lessons learned from the experiments will be used as a basis for decisions on where and how to adapt the data collection infrastructure of Statistics Netherlands from 2025 onwards.

The work in these three areas will provide input for a roadmap and help us move forward in the realization of the vision whilst engaging our stakeholders in the process.

Literature:

Erikson J., Giesen D., Houben, L. and Saraiva, P. (2022, to be published). Managing response burden for official statistics business surveys – experiences and recent developments at Statistics Netherlands, Statistics Portugal and Statistics Sweden. In Snijkers, G. et al. (eds.), *Advances in business Statistics, methods and data collection*: chapter 10. Wiley, Hoboken, New Jersey.

Houben, L (2021). Position Paper ‘Focus on The Reporting Business’, multi-year plan reduction response burden 2021-2023 (in Dutch). Statistics Netherlands, The Hague/Heerlen.

Nieuwenhuijs, R et al (2022). ‘A new strategy on primary data collection from businesses: “naturally relevant”’. Statistics Netherlands, The Hague/Heerlen.

² See <https://content.sciendo.com/view/journals/jos/34/2/article-p419.xml>

³ This will be presented in another session at this meeting (System-to-System Data Collection in business surveys applied to an agricultural survey: a Proof of Concept. Ger Snijkers)

⁴ This will be presented in another session at this meeting (Building a portal together with the business, for the business. Noël Mingels). Also see Houben, L et al (2021) ‘Towards a web portal for reporting businesses’, Statistics Netherlands Den Haag/Heerlen