

Why Executives Don't Respond To Your Survey

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Abstract

Senior managers and executives in three samples of Australian businesses were surveyed as part of an information systems research project. The response rate was similar to that reported in other information systems research. Non-respondents were surveyed as to their reasons for not completing the questionnaire. These responses were analysed to identify the major reasons why they did not respond. A response rate in the range 42% - 58% is the maximum that is likely in information systems management research.

Keywords

IS Research Methodologies, IS Research Issues.

INTRODUCTION

Mail surveys are a well-established method of collecting data from a large number of people or organizations. They are used extensively in political and social science research, marketing and economics and are frequently the method of choice for information systems research and publication. Sample surveys, face-to-face interviews, Delphi surveys and experimentation are some of the methods chosen by researchers into information systems topics. Each method has its advantages and its drawbacks and for different types of research each will be the method of choice. Much has been written on the problems of survey design, Dillman (1978: 4) refers to over 200 studies into how response rates to mail surveys might be improved. The level of response to mail surveys is relevant to the reliability of the results. Regardless of the quality of the survey instrument and the methodology in information systems research the response rate is rarely high. This may be due to a number of factors, including the categories of people who are the subject of most information systems research, such as executives, managers, users and designers. This paper reports on the reasons given by business executives and senior managers in Australia who stated that they would not complete the main questionnaire of a research project but who were willing to give their reasons for not responding in a single question ancillary survey.

MAIL SURVEYS IN IS RESEARCH

Ein-Dor and Segev (1981) identify four principal modes of research which are used to study management information systems: laboratory experiments, field experiments, surveys and case studies. This categorisation is confirmed by Ives *et al.* (1980) and Vitalari (1984). Vogel and Wetherbe (1984) provide evidence to support the contention that most information systems research uses traditional approaches. They reported that survey research accounted for 36.3% of research publications by leading institutions in the United States. A large percentage of information systems

management research is carried out using mail surveys. All authors report response rates and most show their concern for survey design by referring to techniques used in an attempt to increase the rate of response to their surveys.

Galliers (1987) records that survey experts from the London School of Economics advised that a response rate of around 10% is the most one could expect from a large mail survey of businesses. A pattern of responses to large mail surveys was elicited by reviewing articles published recently in leading information systems journals. Loch *et al.* (1992) reported a 20% response rate to a survey of 657 senior U.S. managers on threats to information systems. Loch used follow-up postcards. Dekleva (1992), in two surveys of 1000 and 500 information systems managers in the U.S., reported response rates of 12.2% and 22.4% respectively. The second survey was made after changes were made to the first in an effort to increase the response rate. Steinbart and Nath, in surveying CEOs regarding problems and issues in the management of data communications networks, reported a response rate of 23.4%. They commented that the response rate was ". . . not unusual for a mail survey" (1992: 60). Boynton *et al.* reported a response rate of 36% to a survey of 365 firms, a ". . . response rate higher than normally observed in comparable studies" (1994: 305). Raymond *et al.* (1995), in a study of the relationship between organizational structure and information technology, reported a response rate of 16% from a sample of 1000 CEOs in Canada. Iivari (1995) recorded a 35.5% response rate from a survey of businesses which were contacted by telephone prior to the mailing of the questionnaire. Hitchman (1995) surveyed 736 subscribers to a computer magazine and obtained a response rate of 10.5%. To attempt to increase the response rate, all non-respondents were telephoned. As a result a further 12.2% responded. Nearly 35% of the sample proved to be no longer at the address or were absent on holiday or for some other reason. Hitchman's follow-up provides a different profile of reasons for non-response from our survey, most likely because of the different nature of the group sampled: magazine subscribers vs business executives. More recently, Ward *et al.* (1996), obtained a 24% response rate in surveying senior management in 250 large U.K. companies.

From the above examples it is reasonable to infer that response rates in information systems management research are likely to be in the range 10%–35%. This paper provides some reasons why it is unlikely that response rates in information systems management surveys will be much higher than that.

THE MAIN PROJECT

Our main research project was designed to explore and evaluate experiences and problems in the planning, management and use of information systems in Australian business. The overall study surveyed three samples of Australian organizations chosen to represent the business demographics of Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (1993) reports on the Australian business sector in eight employment size groupings, the largest being those businesses employing more than 1000 people. In 1993 there were 26,060 organizations with 20 to 99 employees, 4218 with 100 to 499 employees and 1090 with more than 500 employees. A total of 1100 organizations in three samples of Australian companies were surveyed: those with 20 to 100 employees, those with 101 to 500 employees and those with more than 500 employees. These groups include Australian owned and managed companies as well as part or completely foreign owned or controlled. The ABS (1993) includes statistics for a defined business unit titled "Management Units". Our survey used a term "organization" which was defined in the questionnaire and is a close surrogate for the ABS Management Unit.

METHODOLOGY

A mail survey was the only suitable method for the large sample to be researched. Dillman's (1978) recommendations on survey and questionnaire design were closely followed, except that more questions were included than are recommended as a maximum. In the ancillary survey, the subject of this paper, only one question was asked. Questionnaire booklets, personally addressed introduction letters and reply-paid envelopes were mailed to members of the Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants (ASCPA) who held executive or senior management positions in the companies surveyed. Three weeks later a follow-up letter was posted to non-responders. This was followed by a second reminder where necessary. The second reminder letter was also a separate survey designed to determine the reasons why some of the people sampled did not respond. The reminder asked addressees to please respond or alternatively to tick one of a list of reasons for not completing the main survey. Total confidentiality was assured. This paper is based on the responses to this separate survey.

RESULTS

Specific demographic data is not available for respondents to the ancillary survey, however, the addressees were all those who had failed to respond to the main survey and demographic data is available for those who responded to the main survey. All samples were drawn from ASCPA members who hold senior management or executive positions in business. Table 1 show that all respondents to the main survey held senior management or executive positions. We have no reason to expect that the ancillary survey respondents would not fit this profile.

Table 1. Descriptions of Positions Currently Held by Respondents*

Description	Large Org'ns (%)	Medium Org'ns (%)	Small Org'ns (%)
Finance controller (Director)	34	42	25
Accounting manager	15	13	12
Divisional manager	9	4	5
Information systems manager	9	2	0
Management accountant	8	5	11
CEO	5	10	14
Director	3	6	9
Other managerial positions	17	18	24

*n = 345

It was also necessary that the respondents to the main survey be as representative as possible of the population. Table 2 lists the organizations surveyed classified according to ABS (1993) industry classifications. The respondent samples fit well with the population, except for over-representation of manufacturing and under representation of community services. This is almost certainly explained by manufacturing industries employing a higher percentage of accountants than do community services organizations. . We have no reason to expect that the ancillary survey respondents would not fit this profile.

Table 2. Organizations Surveyed by Industry Type

Industry	Large Org'ns*		Medium Org'ns**		Small Org'ns***	
	Sample (%)	Pop'n [†] (%)	Sample (%)	Pop'n [†] (%)	Sample (%)	Pop'n [†] (%)
Manufacturing	44.6	27.0	45.2	28.7	36.6	20.8
Finance, property and business services	16.4	12.8	15.1	15.1	11.1	15.8
Mining	6.0	2.3	5.6	1.9	2.6	0.0
Transport and storage	6.0	4.7	6.3	4.5	6.5	4.2
Electricity, gas and water	4.5	3.1	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0
Wholesale trade	4.5	6.7	9.5	7.9	15.0	9.2
Retail trade	4.5	5.7	7.2	7.3	11.1	12.5
Agriculture, forestry or fishing	3.0	0.7	1.6	2.3	3.9	2.5
Construction	3.0	4.3	6.3	3.9	7.8	6.3
Communication	3.0	0.3	0.8	0.0	0.7	0.0
Recreation, personal and other services	3.0	7.1	1.6	10.6	4.6	15.9
Community services	1.5	25.6	0.8	17.1	0.1	12.8

*n = 66

**n = 126

***n = 153

[†] Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Profiles of Australian Business 1992.

The response rates for both the main and ancillary surveys are shown in Table 3. The response rates for the main survey were 33 to 36%. This is equal to the best results typically achieved by information systems management mail surveys. The researchers feel that the high response rates achieved in this survey was due to careful survey design and the support of the Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants who not only provided the names of members in executive position in business organizations but also provided a letter to the addressees confirming the Society's support. The non-respondents to the original survey were used to create new samples for each organization size. The ancillary survey was sent to all members of the new sample and the response rates were 45 to 50%

Table 3. Response Rates for the Two Surveys

Description	Large Org'ns (%)	Medium Org'ns (%)	Small Org'ns (%)	Total (%)
<i>Original Samples</i>				
Responses to the main survey	35.5	35.6	33.4	34.6
Responses to the ancillary survey	29.6	32.5	30.8	31.2
<i>New Samples - Non-Respondents to Main Survey</i>				
Responses to the ancillary survey	45.8	50.4	46.2	47.6

The results of the ancillary survey are shown in Table 4. The pattern of reasons is similar across the three organizational size groups, with the exception of the third entry in the table. The percentage of respondents who believed that the main survey was not applicable to them increased as organizational size decreased.. Bearing in mind that the purpose of the main research project was to explore and evaluate experiences and problems in the planning, management and use of information systems in Australian business, it would be a reasonable assumption that as the size of organizations decreased there would be an increasing probability that they would not undertake these activities in a formal manner and that the survey was not, therefore, applicable.

Table 4. Reasons Given for Not Completing the Main Questionnaire

Reasons	Large Org'ns* (%)	Medium Org'ns** (%)	Small Org'ns*** (%)	Total (%)
I normally would but at present I do not have the time	43.6	40.9	31.9	37.3
I am inundated with requests for data so I must prioritise	18.2	13.9	15.6	15.4
It is not applicable to my organization	10.9	21.7	36.2	26.4
The organization is not willing to release the data	10.9	7.0	2.8	5.8
This particular survey looks too long	5.5	0.9	1.4	1.9
As a general principle I do not complete any of these voluntary research questionnaires	3.6	9.6	6.4	7.1
It is against company policy	5.5	6.1	5.0	5.5
I do not think that this or any similar survey serves any useful purpose	1.8	0.0	0.7	0.6

*n = 55 **n = 115 *** n = 141

The responses reported in Table 4 were divided into three groups. Lack of time was the main factor in people choosing not to respond to the main survey. This was specifically referred to by between 31.9% and 43.6% of respondents. The second most frequent reason was that respondents had to prioritise requests and this particular survey was not given a high enough priority to be completed. With these two responses was grouped the response that the survey looked too long, and therefore by implication the respondents were not willing to allocate their time to answering it. Organizational constraints are a second major grouping: respondents' organizations were not willing to release the data or it was against organizational policy to do so. The third grouping that can be made is of those who do not see any benefit from such surveys. This includes those who either do not answer from principle or do not think these types of survey serve any useful purpose. These three groupings, together with the 'not applicable' responses are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Grouped Reasons Given for Not Completing the Main Questionnaire

Reasons	Large Org'ns* (%)	Medium Org'ns** (%)	Small Org'ns*** (%)	Total (%)
<i>Grouped</i>				
Lack of time	67.3	55.7	48.9	54.7
Organizational constraints	16.4	13.0	7.8	11.3
Not interested in surveys	5.5	9.6	7.1	7.7
Not applicable to the organization	10.9	21.7	36.2	26.4

*n = 55 **n = 115 *** n = 141

It is reasonable to accept that the results of the ancillary survey are representative of all non-respondents. By applying these results to the entire sample all subjects of the main survey can be accounted for as either respondents or non-respondents with reasons for not responding. This is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Results of the Ancillary Survey Applied to the Original Samples

Reasons	Large Org'ns* (%)	Medium Org'ns** (%)	Small Org'ns*** (%)	Total (%)
Responded to the main survey	35.5	35.6	33.4	34.6
Did not respond due to:				
Lack of time	43.4	35.8	32.6	35.8
Organizational constraints	10.6	8.4	5.2	7.3
Not interested in surveys	3.5	6.2	4.7	5.0
Not applicable to the organization	7.0	14.0	24.1	17.3

*n = 55 **n = 115 *** n = 141

This paper shows that, in a survey of business executives and senior managers relating to information systems management, about 38% to 54% will not reply because they lack the time or are subject to organizational constraints. There is a small group who will not respond voluntarily because they are not interested in surveys of this kind. This means that a response rate of about 42% to 58% is the best that can ever be expected using mail surveys of businesses for information systems research.

IMPLICATIONS

There are always trade-offs between costs of different methods of collecting survey data and the type and quality of data that may be collected by different methods. The quality and validity of data collected by mail surveys is affected by how representative of the population the respondents are as a group. The response rate to mail surveys is affected by a number of factors including design parameters and the respondents' propensity to respond. This paper has referred to authorities on mail survey design and has provided some findings explaining why responses to research into information systems management in the business sector is usually low. It is inherently difficult to target accurately a survey so that it is relevant to all subjects. It is likely that there will always be a substantial number of people in any sample to whom the survey is not relevant. Researchers must take all possible actions in their sample selection to reduce this to a minimum. Responses will be reduced because executives are under time pressure and are subjected to requests for information from many quarters. A number of organizations, particularly larger ones, place restraints divulging in response to outside requests such as research surveys. Finally, there are obviously people who will not voluntarily complete questionnaires. For these reasons, even in a survey which is perfectly targeted to its sample, about 42% to 58% response rate is the maximum that is likely to be achieved.

To enable statistical tests to be applied to the data collected, it is necessary that a sufficient number of responses is received. Researchers cannot rely on the achievement of very high response rates to achieve this sufficiency. Those intent on using mail surveys should carefully consider whether their survey is necessary and whether an alternative method might be not be more suited to their purposes.

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