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Communication with Classification Users by Statistics New Zealand

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Introduction

One of the most difficult aspects for statistical classification developers is communication with users of statistical classifications. Challenges include:

- Informing them of impending reviews and classification work programmes;
- Enabling input into the development, maintenance and review of classifications;
- Assisting with the implementation of classifications including classification support, coding tools and concordances;
- Dissemination of all classifications related products and information.

This paper seeks to discuss the approaches being undertaken and trialled by the Classifications and Standards section of Statistics New Zealand.

Background

Statistics New Zealand has a centralised Classifications and Standards section (C&S) which has been responsible for the development, maintenance, review and implementation of standard statistical classifications since 1993. Having this centralised section has ensured a level of consistency in the approaches taken in classification development, and has reduced the burden on subject matter output areas to take responsibility for classifications. It has also enabled more stakeholder involvement in classifications reviews as they get to work with a single business unit whose focus is the development of fit-for-purpose, real world, standard classifications.

C&S maintains a role in coordinating reviews of statistical standards, and standard classifications that are used across Statistics New Zealand and the Official Statistical System (OSS). C&S also supports areas developing their own classifications through the provision of classifications best practice advice.

The current practice in Statistics New Zealand has been to follow a relatively formal review programme and utilise a standard process for review, depending on whether the classification is primarily for internal use or for use across the OSS.

This practice is generally driven by:

- the need to create new, or review existing classifications to fit in with the five yearly Census of Population and Dwellings;
- the need to adapt or adopt international classifications as and when they are reviewed, eg ISIC, ISCO, CPC;
- the joint work programme with, or the opportunity to collaborate with, the Australian Bureau of Statistics to produce an Australian and New Zealand standard;
- real world or legislative changes.

Issues

In addition to the challenges above, further issues pertaining to classifications are:

- reducing stakeholder burden in terms of their input to classification reviews;
- the need to be more efficient with classification development time;
- reducing the overall cost of producing, and implementing a new classification.

There is a drive to be more efficient and cost effective when undertaking reviews especially when needing to spend extensive time periods working with stakeholders both internal and external. Stakeholder time and input is critical and precious but just as with respondent burden, stakeholder cooperation is based on the amount of time and effort they are able or see the benefit of committing to a review. Lengthy reviews may alienate stakeholders and also impact on how successfully a new classification can be implemented.

Examples of lengthy reviews are the development of the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) and the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO).

ANZSIC commenced development in 2000, culminating in release of the classification in 2006 and final implementation in 2011. ANZSCO commenced in 2001, culminating in release of the classification in 2006, and final implementation in 2007. This amount of time is not always practical in ensuring that the classification is relevant upon release or cost effective to produce. ANZSIC was a review of an existing classification (ANZSIC93) so shorter time frame to completion could have been expected, whereas ANZSCO was a brand new classification, therefore a longer time-frame may have been appropriate.

Management of the above issues is anticipated to have a corresponding effect on the overall cost of producing and implementation of new or reviewed classifications.

Solutions

New styles:
Kanban/Agile methodology

Towards the end of 2010, the Classifications and Standards (C&S) team at Statistics New Zealand started to look at different options for undertaking classification reviews and communicating with users. This need was driven out of a desire to be innovative in how classification reviews were undertaken and communicated to users.

The first step was to take the existing review process and use this as an overarching guideline, under which sat a Kanban or Agile approach. Utilising the Kanban approach allows:

- work to be put into a more robust workflow
- an entire team can brainstorm a task
- team members take ownership for tasks
- constant checks and balances and review process – thus giving higher quality outcomes
- better utilisation of team skills and capabilities
- greater stakeholder involvement

In addition to the above, C&S are investigating the use of Wiki to enable better communication during classification reviews. Wiki would be utilised as a one-stop forum between classification developers, stakeholders, interest groups and users to circulate research and to collaboratively prepare documents. At the completion of the review, the Wiki would be archived so that there was a complete record of work done.

Both of these approaches have yet to be fully trialled as the work programme and capability for the C&S team has been significantly disrupted by the two Christchurch earthquakes (September 2010 and February 2011).

Rather than just a traditional schedule of work, in 2010 - a one, three and ten year classifications planning process was undertaken to facilitate identification of user needs, and ascertain their requirements and priorities for relevant, real-world classifications. The planning process ensures that the best use of resources and capability is achieved, and that correct priority of work required has been agreed.

An initial schedule was developed based on real world knowledge, incorporating the recognised efficiencies of working alongside classification development expectations of international agencies. This schedule was communicated to a broad group of classifications users to check the priorities and rationale that had been determined. This communication conversely achieved buy in from those involved in the discussions as to the necessity and recognition that their future planning required time dedicated to involvement in the classification review process.

Schedule communication and user involvement to constantly maintain the relevant prioritisation of the schedule, and managing the adhoc classification developments and reviews into this schedule is now part of a permanent process within the functions of the C&S team.

An evaluation of the process which is performed to review classifications and corresponding standards will also be completed in the near future, with an aim to either update this process or reconfirm its current state.

More standard approaches:

Other approaches that have been undertaken include clarifying the types of classification reviews that will be performed, developing an information paper, developing a classification newsletter, and improved dissemination processes.

Types of Classification Reviews

Statistics New Zealand utilises three types of reviews - major, minor and update - and the type of review is communicated to stakeholders at the start of the review process. This facilitates the type of resourcing that is required from stakeholders and also gives them some idea as to the size and timeframe of the review. The definitions on the different types of reviews have also been agreed to between C&S and the Standards and Classifications section of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Further information on the types of classification reviews can be found in Appendix A.

Classifications Information Paper

During 2010 the Classifications and Standards section instigated the development and release of a classifications information paper to inform stakeholders of the intended work programme. The paper gave stakeholders:

- an overview of the statistical standard classification reviews expected to take place in the future
- the criteria for statistical standard classification reviews (see Appendix B)

- information about how stakeholders can contact Statistics New Zealand to submit comments
- an intended review schedule with approximate start dates

The information paper can be found at the Statistics New Zealand website:
http://www.stats.govt.nz/surveys_and_methods/methods/classifications-and-standards/statistical-standard-and-standard-classification-reviews-information-paper

Newsletter

The C&S team reinstated a newsletter designed to inform users of updates regards current and future work, and general information about classifications related activities and staff. Currently this has become an internal document sitting within the unit's homepage on the corporate network. There is also a latest news section posted on the Classifications page of the Statistics New Zealand website.

Classification Dissemination

All standard classifications and statistical standards are available, along with the Classifications Code Finder (CCF) - a web enabled classification search engine, and the Classifications Coding System (CCS) - a downloadable coding tool, on the Statistics New Zealand website. This is the primary portal for dissemination of statistical classifications information. There is limited opportunity for stakeholders and users to communication back to Statistics New Zealand through this portal, and little ability for Statistics New Zealand to communicate to stakeholders of new or revised information on the web pages.

A required element of a new or improved corporate classifications management system (currently CARS), greater functionality for notifying users would be incorporated, initially internally but if extended to a web enabled system this could include external notification.

The review process

The existing review process may be seen at times as an issue to achieving efficiencies, however this process has been refined over time based on past practices and experiences. A structured review process utilising classification best practice principles now exists, however review of this process will be undertaken to reassess its continued relevance.

Reviews of a classification are conducted when it has been identified that the classification has not been reviewed for a significant period of time, or for which there is real world or international change which affects the ability of the classification to produce fit-for-purpose statistics.

An explanation of the review process can be found in Appendix B.

Further information

Further information about the classifications work undertaken by Statistics New Zealand can be found on the Statistics New Zealand website

http://www.stats.govt.nz/surveys_and_methods/methods/classifications-and-standards/

or by emailing

classifications@stats.govt.nz

Appendix A: Terminology for Reviews

Types of reviews

Every standard classification should be reviewed at appropriate intervals to ensure that it is still relevant and meeting the needs of key users. There are three types of reviews that can be undertaken for a statistical classification. These are:

- Classification Update
- Classification Minor Review
- Classification Major Review

An update is deemed to be an immediate change, a minor review can be scheduled maintenance usually on a 4-5 year cycle, and a major review is scheduled maintenance/development more appropriate to a ten yearly cycle.

Classification Update

A classification update occurs for operational reasons ie an immediate response to reflect needs in administrative collections or because of legislative change.

A classification update does not alter the conceptual base of a classification and should only have very minimal impact on the classification structure (particularly if a hierarchical classification).

A classification update only applies to two New Zealand Standard Classifications. These are:

- New Zealand Standard Classification of Countries (NZSCC) - to reflect immediate need for Customs/Immigration purposes.
- New Harmonised System Classification (NZHSC) - to reflect immediate need for Customs tariff changes as promulgated by the New Zealand Government.

Classification Minor Review

A classification minor review can occur on a regular schedule as agreed with stakeholders and/or between the statistical agencies, based on a real world change, and as work programmes and resources allow. The scope of a classification minor review may include some or all of the following:

- Clarification of category definitions including the addition or deletion within categories at the lowest level of a classification of primary activities, alternative titles or specialisations;
- Inclusion of emerging and/or new categories at the lowest level of a classification to reflect real world change or, for example to split categories such as not elsewhere classified.

A classification minor review will usually occur on a 4-5 yearly cycle after a major review unless a shorter time-frame is required, and usually will occur between population censuses.

A classification minor review does not alter the conceptual base of a classification, may change the classification structure at the lowest level (of an hierarchical classification) but does not change higher levels of a classification.

Classification Major Review

A classification major review occurs on a regular schedule as agreed with stakeholders or users and/or between the statistical agencies, and as the work programmes and resources allow, or if there is a significant change in an international classification which impacts on an existing statistical classification used in New Zealand.

A classification major review may include some or all of the following:

- Conceptual changes
- Structural changes
- Definitional changes including clarification of category scope and revision of any inclusions or exclusions

A classification major review will occur in a ten-fifteen cycle subject to stakeholder requirement/need, real world change, and/or an agreed review cycle/strategy as determined with the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Appendix B: How classification reviews are undertaken

Statistics New Zealand undertakes a systematic and comprehensive process to regularly update statistical classifications. The review team includes topic specialists within Statistics New Zealand, while stakeholders comprise central and local government and other key external users of the data. Stakeholders are often divided into two groups (1) a reference group which comprises key external stakeholders who can comment and advise on the conceptual base, structure and content of the classification; and (2) a statistical advisory group which comprises stakeholders who can comment and advise on the content of the classification. Stakeholders are invited to discuss issues with, and potential changes to, the current classifications.

The review team undertakes research to assess the current state of the classification, the issues involved, and historical and international practices. A revised classification is drafted and taken to stakeholders for consultation. The consultation is an iterative process, ensuring that all stakeholders have multiple opportunities to express views and raise concerns. The reviewed classification is developed to ensure that it is fit for purpose, comparable with international standards and relevant to the New Zealand context.

After the review team and stakeholders are satisfied with the reviewed classification, both the classification are submitted to an internal approval process, endorsed by a Statistics New Zealand management board and approved by the Government Statistician. The classification is then published to the web, implemented into statistical outputs and promoted across the Official Statistics System.

Communication with stakeholders during a review is via email, with regular project team meetings and occasional workshops or face-to-face meetings with stakeholders collectively. Whilst a useful and traditional process, this doesn't always achieve an economic and effective outcome as it is dependent on stakeholder commitment and availability. In the New Zealand context, the majority of stakeholders are located in one city, so face-to-face meetings can be undertaken on a regular basis, however there is the financial cost of this process.

For internal purposes, classification reviews have been undertaken utilising a Lotus Notes database, the Standards Framework, as a mechanism for involving stakeholders, and for keeping review information in one place. Whilst this has been seen as a useful tool for utilisation within Statistics New Zealand, it does not allow for direct interaction with external stakeholders and users. Consequently their comments and submissions have to be stored in a separate database. There are other limitations that the database brings to the work which has meant that a better development and communication strategy is required for future classification reviews, and communication with stakeholders.

During the ANZSCO review, for example, a web discussion forum was instigated to facilitate user communication and document distribution. This forum required registration and password access and was the first attempt at a web forum for facilitating a classification review. This however proved a short-term operation as changes to the Statistics New Zealand website, the need for users to remember passwords and difficulties for stakeholders to attach documents conspired to make use of the forum difficult.

More information on the review process can be found at the Statistics New Zealand website: http://www.stats.govt.nz/surveys_and_methods/methods/classifications-and-standards/classifications-and-standards-review-process.aspx