

Country experience: United States (Chapter 21)

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21.21. The Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), an agency of the Department of Commerce of the United States, started collecting international investment data via the Automated Survey Transmission and Retrieval (ASTAR) system in 2000. The system was subsequently used in connection with surveys of trade in services. One of the key features of the ASTAR system is its ability to allow respondents to work at their own pace until the data are ready for submission. The system also incorporates data export and import capabilities for integration with other software, such as spreadsheets, as well as encryption features that safeguard the confidentiality of the reported data. In 2005, BEA began researching electronic filing alternatives in the face of evolving technology, and selected e-forms as the basis of its second-generation electronic survey data collection program, called eFile.

21.22. One of the main benefits of the eFile system is the lower cost of maintenance when compared with ASTAR. The eFile system is supported and maintained in-house and not by external contractors. More specifically, BEA can build the fillable forms in-house (using forms supplied by the Census Bureau), whereas ASTAR must be supported by external contractors.

21.23. Another key benefit and feature of eFile is the password-protected portal site, which allows respondents to manage their own passwords; with ASTAR, respondents must contact BEA at the beginning of each reporting cycle to receive period-specific passwords. The ease of eFile password management reduces the maintenance burden for BEA and may also encourage more respondents to use the eFile system.

21.24. The eFile system also has the potential to collect more accurate data, as fillable forms allow more flexibility in checks for validity and form-specific logic than ASTAR. Additionally, BEA can better ensure data security, as respondents save and submit their encrypted data on the BEA website. Lastly, eFile users receive confirmation of their submissions almost instantaneously, whereas ASTAR respondents receive confirmation only after the data have been loaded into the internal database of BEA. BEA plans to phase out ASTAR and convert to eFile for all of its surveys. In addition, the development of a feature allowing respondents to import their data directly into eFile, without the need to enter data manually, is seen as a major improvement. The survey managers and information technology specialists at BEA are committed to working together to continually improve and augment the system.

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