

2007... and still counting

by David Eadie



The modernized census improves data and reporting, and saves money

NOT ALL NUMBER crunchers are grey, stolid types. Anil Arora, director general of the Census Program Branch at StatsCan, is jazzed and his voice bounces down the phone line. “Just wait,” he says. “As the next year and a half unfolds the amount of data that we will give back to Canadians – free of charge on our website – will be immense.”

Mind you, given the top marks the census people got in the Auditor General’s report you can’t blame him for feeling rather good. The 2006 census was the first outing for their integrated Internet option, which allowed people to file their information online and it was one of only two federal government projects the AG singled out as having a “sound business case” and that “proved feasible, met a defined business need, and made sense from a value-for-money perspective.”

The census scored big in “value for money” – saving better than \$11 million over the 2001 Census. The big reason? The integrated approach meant that they had to hire fewer than half of the usual fifty thousand part-time enumerators.

As attractive as these savings are, the real improvement, according to Arora, was that the quality of the responses was much better this time around. “Local enumerators became a bit of a liability for us. Even though interviewers were sworn in to the *Secrecy Act*, people were reluctant for their personal information to be handled by someone from within their community. They wanted a faceless bureaucrat . . .”

Census personnel are still sworn in under the *Act* and the security issue cannot be overstressed. There is any number of very good reasons to be wary of giving out one’s personal information – stories of identity theft and fraud abound. The Census Branch went to great lengths to reassure Canadians that every possible security measure had been taken to guard their information. “It took us a long time,” says Arora, “to find the right company with the right infrastructure,

that would respect our security requirements, and still give us meaningful results in terms of volume testing and response rates.”

In the end a consortium, Global Business Services, comprised of IBM Canada, Lockheed-Martin Canada and Transcontinental Printing won the contract. “The customer – Statistics Canada – was looking for a company that had the right references and the right credentials,” says Stan Roy of IBM. “We presented the best overall solution to the government.”

While price is always an important element to the government’s well-defined procurement process, Roy credits their experience as the deciding factor. “You want to deliver on time, on budget and have a delighted customer and, if you do that, you get references and one builds on to the next,” he says, “In the US, for example 70 percent of the evaluation is based on track record.” A persuasive part of their track record is that Lockheed-Martin had worked on census projects in the US and Great Britain.

The consortium worked with the Census Branch from the very start. “They wanted to make sure that people could easily get online and fill out their census form,” says Roy. “They also wanted to make sure that security was paramount – all the way from the browser to the data processing centre.”

A bi-directional or dual encryption system was developed. Once the Census Branch assigns you an access code, data can be sent specifically to you and you can send specifically encrypted data back to Statistics Canada. Your data is encrypted even before it leaves your computer, passes through numerous firewalls and is passed on to StatsCan.

In addition to being more secure, the system allows far more flexibility and is less time-consuming than traditional methods. In essence, the form you complete is tailored to you by means of what are called “skip patterns.” For example, if you have responded that you live in an apartment, questions regarding a mortgage will not appear on

your screen. Also, you will be automatically prompted to fill out areas that you might have missed. It makes for more complete and accurate data.

Independent firms, approved by the federal Communications Security Establishment (CSE) and the RCMP tried to penetrate those systems – obviously unsuccessfully. The system was also tested in select parts of the country as a small part of the 2001 Census. The results were promising – a five to six percent response rate – and in keeping with the government’s “Government On Line” policy to promote a more client-centric environment for service delivery.

The 2006 rate of electronic return has been even more promising – around 20 percent nationally and they’re hoping to double that by 2011. It is a rate that compares very well with other countries that are also stepping onto the e-path – Australia at nine percent and New Zealand at eight percent.

Anil Arora attributes the clear advantage both to the government’s policy of making services available online and the fact that Canadians are comfortable with online transactions. “Canada is arguably the most connected nation on earth in terms of making the most transactions – electronic banking and so on,” he says. “There is a well developed trust and usage of the Internet.”

Ralph Chapman, IBM’s vice president for federal government business, feels that the census is a positive advance in the trend towards government-wide online delivery systems. “You look at service delivery models and clearly the best and most cost-effective channel is online,” he says. “The more services that can be delivered through alternate channels (other than face-to-face), the better for everyone.”

As for Anil Arora – well, the 2006 census is barely a toddler and already he’s revving up for the next one – a mere five years away. *mm*

David Eadie is a Toronto-based freelance writer.