

The Challenges of Providing International Statistical Training

Elizabeth A. Taylor
U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
Rm. 2190
2 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20212 USA
Taylor_Elizabeth@bls.gov

Abstract

Providing statistical training to groups composed of representatives of different countries poses many challenges. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has been conducting international seminars since 1945. This paper discusses the challenges that we encounter. It presents some of the ways in which we deal with the challenges and our thoughts on what further steps we must take in order to make the training as effective as possible.

Fournir la formation statistique aux groupes composés de représentants de différents pays pose beaucoup de défis. Le Bureau des Statistiques de Travail des Etats Unis dirige des conférences internationales depuis 1945. Cet article expose les défis que nous rencontrons. Il présente certaines des manières desquelles nous traitons les défis et nos pensées sur ce que de plus nous devons faire afin de rendre la formation aussi efficace comme possible.

Introduction

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) is the statistical agency of the United States government in the broad field of labor economics and statistics. Each year, the BLS International Labor Statistics Center conducts several international seminars of 4 to 6 weeks' duration at its training facilities in Washington, DC. We may also conduct programs designed to meet specific needs.

Each seminar and special program is designed to strengthen the participants' abilities to collect and analyze economic and labor statistics. They emphasize highly specialized techniques, not taught in academic programs, and the practical aspects of managing statistical programs. BLS program experts and others serve as the principal instructors, lecturing, conducting workshops, and leading discussions.

Participants are typically employees of national statistical offices, ministries of labor, and other government agencies that use or produce labor market information or price change data. We recommend that participants have an elementary knowledge of statistics and some experience analyzing labor or social data.

Providing training to international groups is both a rewarding and challenging endeavor. We may encounter day-to-day problems of language and culture. We may have difficulty reaching the proper target audience. We are attempting to improve our methods for assessing the needs of participants and their organizations and for evaluating the impact of the training that we provide.

The Challenges

Identifying and Meeting Needs: Most countries that need assistance to develop and improve their statistical capacity are not able to afford the large staffs or technology to replicate BLS' s stage of development. Of course, it is easiest for us to provide instruction on what BLS is currently doing. However, this is not necessarily helpful.

Generally, seminar groups are made up of 6 to 12 people, each representing a different country. The statistical system and programs of each country may be at different stages and thus have different needs.

We do not solicit information about these needs in advance of the seminar participants' arrival at BLS. We may have some information based on evaluations done by the countries themselves, by international organizations or by consultants.

On the other hand, when we conduct a special program the participants represent a single country or several countries in a region. The program is designed to address specific issues and these issues are explored in advance in order to ensure that they are addressed thoroughly during the program.

I believe that we can – and must – do a better job in the seminar programs to make the instruction more relevant to the needs of other countries, as we already do in the special programs.

Participants: As previously stated, we recommend that participants “should have an elementary knowledge of statistics and some experience in analyzing labor or social data.” There are no specific requirements for previous training or experience. Since most applicants are from statistical agencies or other government agencies that produce or use labor market information, almost all applicants have educational background and positions generally related to the production or use of statistics.

The two critical criteria for acceptance to a BLS international seminar are financial sponsorship to pay the tuition, travel costs and living expenses in Washington, DC, and a U.S. visa.

A person nominated to attend the BLS seminar must present him or herself at the U.S. Embassy in the home country. The labor officer interviews nominees to assess their seriousness of purpose and suitability for attending a labor statistics course. We do not ask the labor officer to review the person's educational history for the completion of specific coursework. The labor officer may or may not recommend that the Consular Section of the Embassy issue a visa. The consular officer will also interview the nominee and subsequently may or may not issue a visa. Most nominees receive visas.

Not all participants who have cleared the financial and consular hurdles are perfectly suited for training at BLS. They may lack sufficient background in statistics to understand the methodologies presented in the seminars. To address this problem, we are undertaking the development of a statistics program to be used by participants who need either to learn some statistics quickly or to review their knowledge of statistics.

Language: The language of instruction at BLS seminars is English. Simultaneous interpretation is available at an additional, high cost. On the application form we ask for the level of proficiency of the applicant's ability to read, speak and write English, but this is not generally tested. Third party sponsors, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, may require that their nominees pass an English proficiency test.

In the international seminars at BLS, not only is English the language of instruction, much of it is not ordinary American English. Much of it is “statistical English” and much of it is “BLS lingo” or “slang.” Complicating the language problem further is the use of acronyms that people in organizations use.

We encourage the instructors to provide the definitions of words that they may be using in unconventional ways and to avoid the use of acronyms. Of course, speaking slowly is essential.

Training the Trainers: After the staff of the International Labor Statistics Center has developed the agenda for a training program, they contact BLS program managers to ask for experts to serve as instructors. Frequently they ask for an individual who is not only a program expert, but also has experience as a trainer and has received favorable ratings from students in the past. The manager may oblige or may assign another person to make the presentation. We provide each speaker with a list of

general guidelines, but otherwise we do not train the trainers, and therefore do not have much control over the quality of instruction.

The seminar coordinator observes almost all seminar sessions and facilitates them by requesting the instructor to speak more slowly, define the use of words and acronyms, and ask questions to stimulate discussion and reinforce learning. The coordinator/facilitator also may need to intervene to make the necessary links between the methodologies and procedures used by BLS and the issues faced by statistical agencies in other countries.

Lecturers are experts in BLS' s work, but, generally, they are not experts on the statistical methods and work of other countries. Those BLS employees who have had the opportunity to have consulting assignment to other countries and to work with their counterparts on specific issues of developing or improving statistical program are often the best instructors. They understand that statistical agencies of other countries may not be able to adopt the exact of methods of BLS without adapting them to their own situations.

We include those staff members with consulting experience to serve as instructors when possible. We also invite people who serve as consultants for organizations such as the International Monetary Fund to lecture and to attend question and answer sessions.

Training Adults: Adults come to a training session burdened by their experience, expectations, and need for practical and immediate applications. Training designers and instructors must recognize these characteristics of adult students and build on them. The seminar coordinators use techniques that connect prior experience to learning and build on it by relating it to current job responsibilities.

Furthermore, students from different cultures may have different expectations regarding the classroom environment. For example, American students are expected to ask questions and to engage in discussions with their teachers and classmates. This may not be the case in other countries. Instructors who have been educated in the United States will expect their students to ask questions and to engage in discussions. When they do not do that, the instructors may interpret this as a sign of disinterest, cut short their lectures, and even refuse to participate in the future, as they question the value of the international seminars.

Seminar coordinators/facilitators may ameliorate this problem by discussing pedagogical differences with both instructors and students. They should also intervene in the classroom to prompt the students to ask questions and to encourage discussion.

Program Length: The ideal participants in the BLS international seminars are employees with sufficient responsibility and authority in their employing organizations to make changes based on knowledge that is acquired in the seminars. It may be difficult for mid-level and senior staff to be away from their offices for the 4- to 6-week seminar period. The growing use of the facsimile machine in the early nineties made it easier for participants to keep track of the events in their employing organizations and to continue to perform some aspects of their positions. The growing use of personal computers and access to the Internet has further enhanced communications between participants and their employers – and families. Special programs, usually of two weeks duration and custom-designed, may be more appropriate for participants who hold senior positions.

Money: While economic and labor statistics are essential for monitoring and evaluating an economy, when financial resources are scarce, improving statistics may not be a priority. The Bureau of Labor Statistics charges tuition for participation in the international seminars and special programs. (This

income covers all of the expenses of conducting the seminars, including staff salaries.) In addition, participants must have sufficient funds to travel to Washington, DC, and stay there for the duration of their program. While BLS can neither provide financial support nor solicit sponsors on behalf of prospective participants, we do refer people to potential sponsors. These include the U.S. Agency for the International Development, international organizations, such as the World Bank or U.N. Development Program, and regional organizations, such as the Asian Development Bank.

Evaluation: Do the BLS international seminars contribute to the statistical capacity of other countries? At the end of each seminar, we ask participants to evaluate the seminar or program, including the instructors, and covered subject matter. The results are generally favorable; I question their reliability.

Next year we plan to conduct a more comprehensive evaluation that will be aimed not solely at participants but also at the managers of their organizations and the users of the statistics produced by those organizations. The evaluation will ask questions such as, are the people who attended BLS training able to introduce improvements to the statistics of their countries? If not, why not? What further changes are needed?

The results of this evaluation will provide important information about the impact of the international seminars. That information will be fed back into the first challenge that I identified – identifying and meeting the needs of participants and their organizations.

Conclusion

I have discussed challenges of providing training in labor statistics to international groups. Some of them can be addressed and assimilated into the programs through understanding and flexibility on the part of the seminar coordinators, instructors and participants. Other challenges must be addressed explicitly and continuously in order to make the BLS international seminars relevant and effective. I believe that they have general applicability to all providers of international training.

REFERENCES

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RESUME

The author is the director of the International Labor Statistics Center at the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.