

Welfare Benchmark ‘easy to use local/internet DEP’ for the Dutch Municipal Government Officials

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1. Introduction

The Welfare Benchmark of the Netherlands is a project for the Dutch Municipalities to learn and improve their method of applying Municipal welfare programs. The Welfare Benchmark collects data from the Dutch Municipalities using Blaise DEP programs to form a unique central database. The big challenge in this National project is to use Blaise at its maximum potential: easy data-entry for non Blaise-users, namely Municipal-government-officials.

It is the development and implementation of an easy to use Blaise DEP program and all the procedures of creating one central database that this paper addresses. We were confronted with the following technical aspects: easy DEP installations, easy DEP use, easy returning of DEP data and easy DEP data editing; all done locally and through the internet.

Finally, this paper will address which important elements made the Welfare Benchmark so successful and the working relationship with the Central Bureau of Statistics Netherlands and CenterData which contributed to its successful implementation.

2. The target group

The VNG is the national organization for Dutch municipalities. It contains the nonprofit agency StimulansZ that advises all the municipalities about handling the welfare grants from the government for its welfare recipients. With the help of SGBO(research and consultancy department of the Dutch Local Government Association,VNG) and CentERdata (research expert center of the University of Tilburg) it has made a special easy to use Blaise Data-entry program for the Dutch municipalities.

Dutch municipalities send their government official, who is responsible for the Welfare program, to a major meeting of StimulansZ. In large municipalities, this person will delegate the Benchmark project to other government officials but in regular municipalities they would have to use a very easy and uncomplicated data-entry program. Otherwise the Welfare Benchmark would be a total failure.

Last year another program than Blaise was used which caused a lot of problems (Qubus). It was also supposed to be easy but the program accepted data-entry errors and therefore the final database became very unreliable. The Blaise DEP program had to be easy to use but without data-entry errors.

The other program also had a lot of installation problems. This was because all of the Dutch Municipalities have MS Windows but all the system operators made different environments, for example they closed off certain tools and functions like email and major document extensions. Therefore Blaise DEP has to be very easy to install in any MS Windows environment.

Our major task was not to scare off our target group, by using Blaise DEP, and at the same time get the best results possible.

3. The easy installation of Blaise DEP

Blaise Data-entry program is used by the StimulansZ Welfare Benchmark to collect data from a 100 volunteer municipalities. Through this data, StimulansZ will measure long-term progress in achieving the Government strategic plan goals: municipal cooperation, collaboration, and a result-driven approach to problem solving. The results will be compared by how compatible municipalities as a whole are doing, and by performance measurement systems, which seek to measure how a given municipality is performing. Municipalities are therefore clustered in groups of 8 who have similar backgrounds.

“The comparison circle method, as well as all other benchmarking methods, is a quality management instrument. It originates from the desire of local government organisations to be able to compare the individual organisation, services and policy, with peer organisations, in order to improve its quality of services and products. Important in the work with comparison circles, is the fact that the initiative lies with the local authority organisations and is not forced onto them in a top down way by another agency. It is the story behind the data that counts. Comparing the information makes the participants want to look for and discuss the reasons of the differences.”(Drs. Piet C.A. Severijnen Senior Researcher/ Consultant SGB0-VNG, Benchmarking for local authorities according to the comparison circles methodology.)

The best way to reach the municipalities in the Netherlands was through email, or so we thought. Make an individual Blaise DEP program as small as possible and use email to send the questionnaire. It was not as straightforward as we had assumed.

A mailing with questions about the municipal email facilities was conducted among all the participants in the Benchmark. A total of 110 municipalities replied and out of that total only 25 had email restrictions: they could not receive email or they could not receive email attachments larger than 1 megabyte. During the pilot we emailed *.zip files which could not be unzipped by some of the pilot-municipalities. Therefore we made self-extractable *.zip files into the *.exe files. This was a disputable decision, because municipalities who could receive email larger than 1 megabyte could not receive attachments with the extension *.exe due through email-securities. In the end we had to send 50 Cd-roms with 1.5 Megabytes.

3.1. The easy use of Blaise DEP

How would you email a Blaise DEP program which would be easy to install on any computer? We thought of using a self-extractable zipfile which would make the use of Blaise simple and understandable for everyone.

The zipfile would unzip at the C:\ drive (with permission) and make a directory C:\BENCH , in there were two old dos *.Bat files: start.bat (wich would activate Blaise DEP with the municipal-unique number [DEP.EXE /G /K14 bsd] and return.bat (wich would zip all the files starting with a B*.*) and lastly another directory C\BENCH\MARK*.* with all the Blaise files.

The government official had to make MS Windows shortcuts from the start.bat and the return.bat to his MS Windows Desk. With one click on the start.bat shortcut Blaise would activate. When all the data was entered he could click on the return.bat shortcut and everything would be placed in return-zipfile in the directory C:\BENCH with the municipal-unique number. [This was done by ZIPDLL.dll which was made by Bas Weerman of CentERdata] Using his own email program he had to attach the return-zipfile and email this to our organization. In our Pilot this was the function that we improved a lot. In our initial idea we only emailed the Blaise database file back, *.bdb. This was not sufficient because we were using the remark ‘paperclip’ function of Blaise. This functionality creates and uses more files in the Blaise *.bdb directory. Therefore all the files with the programname bsd*.* were zipped and returned to us by email.

All it took to work was to make two MS Windows Shortcuts and a copy of one file in an email program. From the 100 municipalities we received no telephone calls for these three actions.

The next step was the Blaise DEP program itself. A government official was becoming a data-entry person. He was not familiar with any data-entry program or activities in this field.

Therefore we made the Blaise DEP program super simple.

The government official is welcomed by the name of his municipality on the first page

The first page also tells him there are 5 chapters, and to click on one of the Tab-sheets

By clicking on a Tab-sheet at the top he will see all questions of one chapter

Chapter shows the Question and information and the answers on the Left-side

All the question-numbers –enter boxes are displayed on the Right-side

The exception is the question-tables which are on separate pages

There are only 6 speed buttons: Don't Know, Remark, plus 4 navigate buttons

With the same 6 menu-items as in the speed buttons

With an auto save-interval of 3 minutes and auto-save when finished, all goes automatically, no worries about data saving.

At the end of each Tab-sheet are two questions: 1. Would you like to print your entered data of this chapter? 2. Would you like to continue to the next chapter after printing?

The most important part was to make it look simple and finally to enter data easily. Just thinking about entering 135 questions is a big task for a government official. To enter data correctly is in the best interest of the government official so the first look at Blaise DEP was very important.

The DEP menu file controls the menu and speed buttons available in the DEP. The first step was to make the menu-items and speed buttons. We started out with only 2 speed buttons but we found out that navigation through the Blaise DEP became more important when the government official had already entered most of the data. Next, we made the menu-items identical to the speed buttons. This was also to translate everything to Dutch in the DEP menu file.

We had to use the Modelib-editor very thoroughly. Use of easy colors and layout were very important; off-white for the questions and off-green for the answers. The DEP should look and feel comfortable to the Government official. In the options we activated the 'Show parallels on tab sheets'. This activates the easy to use tab sheets in the whole DEP program. The next important feature was the activation of the Field description in Field Panes of Layout Interviewing. This meant that we had to use Field descriptions in the *.bla. At the end of every field [..." / "9" :T9] we placed the question number. We also used three columns in the Grids, Interviewing, and Layout. Through this method we created two major areas: one left side with info panes and on the right side a three-column grid.

3.2. The *.bla for the easy use of Blaise DEP

During our pilot we received very positive feedback. In our initial phase we had created a MS Windows help-file that could be activated by pressing the Blaise help function when the cursor was on a specific question. The pilot government officials said that the procedure worked fine but it would mean an extra step on the part of the person entering data. They told us that the left column with the question showed a lot of unused space. Their suggestion was to use this area for help information. It looked easy and with the help of the Central Bureau of Statistics Netherlands we worked it out. Our MS Windows help file was quit extensive in information. Now all the information had to be put in the *.bla with its limitations.

We ended up using a lot of Aux-fields. We mean a lot because some help-text was just too long (more than 255 positions on one line). This is what it looks like in the rules after they are defined in the Aux-fields:

```
Ko08:=" is a keyword for the question, used in the printing function
Vr08:=" is the question
Df08:=" is the question definition
Tl081:=" is the question help text part 1
Tl082:=" is the question help text part 2
Tl083:=" is the question help text part 3
```

In the fields definition all these Aux-fields would come together in the question and it would look like this:

```
v08  "@B8@B ^vr08@/@/@G@BDefinitie:@B ^df08 ...
... @/@/@BToelichting:@B ^tl08^tl081^tl082^tl083@B@G" / "8" :0..365
```

Because we use PARALLEL in our *.bla we have a nice chapter overview through blocks. By using two include files, one of all the types and procedures together and one of all the tables we made a workable programming area.

The only thing that made the *.bla more complex looking then it really is: is the print function. With the help of Bas Weerman from CentERdata, he made a print_notepad.dll This file activates the MS Windows Notepad program. In this program, all the answers from one chapter are written; the question number, question keyword and the answers . This is the source:

The*.bla file in RULES section the following syntax is written:

```
{print.dll}
  Slot1.Keep IF Slot1 = Ja THEN Delete_File('open') ENDIF
  v03 IF Slot1 = Ja THEN Nette_Str(v03, temp)      Write_Ln(' 3 Dlt.avr. woningaanpassing-
voorlopige beschikking  : ' + temp) ENDIF
  NEWPAGE
  slot1
  slot11
  IF Slot11 = Ja THEN Slot1 := Nee ENDIF
  IF Slot1 = Ja THEN Open_NotePad('open') ENDIF
```

The Procedures.inc file in the procedures section the following syntax is written:

```
PROCEDURE Delete_File
PARAMETERS
  IMPORT
  Tekst: String
  ALIEN('print_notepad.dll',1)
ENDPROCEDURE
```

```
PROCEDURE Write_Ln
PARAMETERS
  IMPORT
  Tekst: String
```

```
    ALIEN('print_notepad.dll',2)
ENDPROCEDURE
```

```
PROCEDURE Open_NotePad
PARAMETERS
    IMPORT
        Tekst: String
    ALIEN('print_notepad.dll',3)
ENDPROCEDURE
```

```
{Definition type for the print_notepad.dll }
PROCEDURE Nette_Str
PARAMETERS
    aIndex: Integer
EXPORT
    aString: String;
RULES
    aString := "
    IF aIndex = EMPTY THEN aString := " ENDIF
    IF aIndex = DONTKNOW THEN aString := '?' ENDIF
    IF aIndex <> EMPTY AND aIndex <> DONTKNOW THEN aString := Str(aIndex) ENDIF
ENDPROCEDURE
```

The main reason for this print function was for the Government official to check if he made typing errors in a specific chapter. A print could also be given to a certain department that would provide all the data for a specific chapter to the Government official. He can therefore make a print of every chapter [Block].

At the end of each chapter there were two questions. The first question would activate notepad and place all the answers in a text-file. This could be printed at that moment. After that action the second question had to be answered to deactivate notepad and go to the following chapter.

This is a functionality we have to improve for next year because some government officials closed the DEP program after printing. This meant that the next time they opened the DEP program the first print question was still in the 'yes I want to print setting', and notepad was started automatically. I saw returned answers in which one Government official started printing after he had entered all his data. When I opened his DEP version 5 notepads were opened automatically and I had 5 prints of answers. This one item seemed confusing to some people. They probably do not read the print functionality correctly. Next year we will look at the implementation of alien routers.

4. The logistics of the benchmark

In the year 2000, 50 municipalities entered the Benchmark, in 2001 there were a 100 municipalities. For the year 2002 we expect a total of 150 out of 500 Dutch Municipalities who will participate in this great project. To make this benchmark efficient it needs good logistics functionality.

We adapted the experience and knowledge from Bas Weerman from CentERdata who operates a household panel in the Netherlands. Through the Blaise Api Calls a separate Blaise *.dbd is created for each Municipality through its unique ID-number. Then all the files are added and zipped to one file with this unique ID-number. Once these are emailed through our panel-emailing list we note email errors. A

confirmation from each municipality is required to fulfill the emailing list with a working DEP checkmark.

Returning emails from the municipalities is the reverse process. A program using Manipula adds all the separate *.dbd to one large file. Manipula is used again but this time to export the data to TAB ASCCI and read by a Cameleon SPSS import file into SPSS. A special report-module makes tables and graphs in MS Word document which will be emailed to all the participated municipalities.

5 Internet and the benchmark

In the beginning of the Blaise DEP programming, plans were made for putting the Municipalities Blaise data on the Internet at CentERdata. With this extra Internet functionality Municipalities can change their own data through the Internet by using their own special ID and Password. This functionality was being introduced when I was writing this paper. The benchmark has its own website for the Municipalities where they can change their address data and change their Benchmark data or add new data. During the presentation, I can tell more about the results of this part of the benchmark.

On the internet we also chose for the use of Parallel tab sheets and added an extra functionality: going to a the question right away. In a special section, the Government official can choose from a chapter pull-down menu the question-number with the question keyword. After the right selection, one is routed automatically to the specific question and the Government official can change his old answer or enter a new value. All of the Municipalities have a hardcopy of their answers from the DEP program. The question numbers resemble the Parallel tab sheets / chapter-numbers. Therefore changing or adding data through the internet will be relatively fast if you know which questions have to be changed or added.

This will give a similar look and feel as the Blaise DEP with the exception that on the Internet version one question at a time comes to the screen, except for the tables that appear as a whole. Next year we will ask a select group of Municipalities to use the Internet instead of the DEP program and ask for feedback. We found out that a lot of Municipalities use the printed version of the question to collect data from different departments. We would like to know next year if entering data through the DEP program is just as fast as using the internet.

At the special Benchmark website we added the reporting page. Each clustered group of Municipalities will arrive at there own cluster after using there login id and password. The report that is made through SPSS and shows it analysis in MS Word is archived in PDF format. Each cluster will see her own special *.PDF report and can therefore be easily downloaded if necessary. In the beginning the idea was to make a clustered report on the webserver but this would be too much time-consuming through all the different calculations that have to be made.

7 Future

The StimulansZ/SGBO Benchmark has been well received in Europe. The European Commission and the European Parlemtent have placed employment and social welfare programs as their international political goal. The Netherlands, Germany and Ireland with their specific programs have a yielding position in Europe on this topic. The CEMR organization is starting a benchmark-pilot for some major European Cities. A new development are the talks with the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics CBS and StimulansZ for cooperation in the Benchmark.

8 Conclusion

The StimulansZ/SGBO Benchmarks will serve as outcome measures for the Municipalities results-driven approach to problem solving. Blaise is used for the Benchmark at its maximum potential: easy data-entry for non Blaise-users, namely Municipal-government-officials. They received through email a DEP program which was zipped. After unzipping the DEP program the Government Official could place the Benchmark program on a computer or network and the Government official could enter all the data easily through 5 chapters. Printing the results or emailing them back to the organization or changing the data through the internet were all that he could do to make the best of his data. Once the results were all printed in a report and emailed back to the Government official, or he could download it from the internet, the comparison of data started in the clustered Municipalities groups. Discussions among all the Government officials of different municipalities were started and its citizens will benefit from these results. Blaise is the main engine behind Data collection of the Benchmark and proved to be a major success.

