

INSEE Contact: a reception and direction service



INSEE Contact Point

Open since 2003, the INSEE Contact service was set up to deal with the most common requests for statistical information and to help requesters by directing them through what INSEE has to offer, mainly on its web-site (www.insee.fr). Since September 2004, the work has been extended to assisting French-speaking Internet users from the Eurostat website. The service operates at three locations, with 30 officials providing the reception and direction service. These 30 people dealt with 110 000 telephone calls and 27 000 e-mails in 2005.

Whatever the source — mail, fax, phone or e-mail — the service handles the requests with the help of call-waiting and call-assistance tools providing standard responses.

INSEE Contact was set up as part of INSEE's overall strategy at the beginning of the decade in order to re-define its policy for disseminating statistical informa-

tion to its two main customer groups: on the one hand, the many members of the public seeking straightforward background information, and on the other, institutional users in France (decision-makers, government departments, local authorities, etc.) responsible for making and implementing decisions.

INSEE Contact provides a public service by way of de-

veloping economic and social information and using available techniques to make it more accessible to all.

Change was thus introduced across the board. The set-up was based on three ideas:

- access for all to up-to-date statistical information using the Internet, thus leading to the creation of the INSEE Contact service;
- response to the specific needs of institutions at local level, with the response provided by the regional directorates;
- a solution for those without access to the Internet, resulting in the introduction of a network of partners (public departments, cyber-points) specialising in dealing with such people.

Creating the INSEE Contact service

A survey conducted from 1999 to 2000 revealed how varied practices were in INSEE's regional directorates, meaning that there was an increased risk of providing differing answers. At the same time, the institute's publications were growing and making increasing use of a more widespread means of communication than the traditional channels: the INSEE website at www.insee.fr. The creation of the INSEE Contact service was the response of INSEE's management board to this situation.

Redefining the mission

The main feature of the policy implemented by the INSEE Contact service is the idea of direction. The growing complexity of what INSEE had to offer prompted a shift in first-level response, primarily to the institute's website. This idea of providing direction became even more justified with the decision to place all of INSEE's standard products, including its databases, on the website, and to make them available free of charge.

Direction involves steering clients in line with their request towards sets of information (represented by the main sections of the www.insee.fr website) and explaining that they can continue searching through these sets until they find the information they're looking for or indicate clearly the product or service that they want to have. One of the stated aims is of course to enable requesters to consult the INSEE website on their own, by making all recent information totally and directly accessible.

Emergence of a new skill

The people staffing the service provide 'general' direction and not 'specialised' answers.

Training was introduced and still continues to help the emergence of this new professional skill. The main difficulty with the project, which became apparent as soon as it started, was getting a team together. The officials are split over three locations which are far apart (Paris, Rouen and Strasbourg), and the problem was therefore how to make their response sufficiently uniform to ensure that the same level of quality and the same answers were being given to members of the public.

An ergonomic analysis was conducted and resulted in recommendations which made it possible to avoid differences among the locations. These included:

- fortnightly videoconferences allowing officials at the different locations to mention actual problems encountered at work and to come up with solutions; a yearly seminar attended by all officials; a dedicated intranet service and a weekly newsletter providing ongoing help in keeping officials informed;
- introduction of a standard working week allowing officials in each location three half-days for training, team meetings and joint work to devise rules and procedures;
- the rules governing the distribution of work outlined in an agreement linking the three locations.

Positive initial report

Two years after starting, the INSEE Contact service has achieved most of its objectives. By providing the bulk of the answers to requests for statistical information, the service is now positioned at the heart of a system of relations which it has helped to create. The policy of encouraging web surfers to take an independent approach seems to be bearing fruit. In most cases, an Internet user who gets the proper guidance the first time to the page or pages he or she is interested in will not need help a second time to arrive at his or her destination. By referring people to the www.insee.fr website and providing appropriate directions, the service is in a sense working towards its own demise, given that it is helping to reduce requests from the general public by responding to them, at a time when Internet traffic has increased tenfold.

Relations with second-level help points (experts, regional directorates)

The service cannot answer all the requests it receives. Redirection to experts or regional directorates are necessary in a number of cases — about one in five — more often involving requests by e-mail rather than by telephone. Referral to back-office units for extra expertise or a particular service has meant that communication protocols needed to be introduced.

In the case of the regional directorates, mutual responsibilities are covered in a service charter. The main purpose is to inform the regional directorates about the service's response procedures and to provide indicators on the relevance and quality of the answers which are given.

In the case of the directorate-general experts, who are most often contacted about matters of methodology or the supply of detailed data, a similar initiative will be completed in 2006.

Relations with statistical information producers and with publishers

The tools introduced by the service allow audiences and their focal interests to be adequately heard. They allow sug-

gestions and criticisms to be made. Analysing the questions which are put provides an opportunity to improve the form and content of INSEE publications. The prime beneficiary is the INSEE website, which very regularly benefits from the suggestions for adaptation, correction and expansion which come from the service thanks to public feedback and requests.

Assessment indicators

Since it started and with the steady increase in its workload, the INSEE Contact service has dealt with almost 200 000 calls and approximately 40 000 e-mails. A monthly table provides a breakdown of requests and answers.

The INSEE Contact service compiles quality indicators every three months. These indicators are published and monitored as part of the charter governing the central administration's reception services.

Author: Yvonne Pérot,
INSEE Contact Point

For further information:

<http://www.insee.fr>