
ETA Response to Comment Submission on O*NET Renewal Request (1205-0421)

The Employment and Training Administration is pleased to acknowledge that the authors of the comment express strong support for the O*NET system, indicate it is an important resource, and consider it indispensable to the development of the nation's workforce.

The authors make a number of thoughtful suggestions and recommendations regarding expansion of the O*NET-SOC taxonomy; the O*NET budget; and improvements to the functionality of the O*NET OnLine tool. The Department will take these suggestions into consideration as part of strategic planning for the O*NET project during future budget cycles, also taking into account Administration priorities and the needs of the workforce in relation to the evolving condition of the economy.

One challenging aspect of developing and maintaining the O*NET system is that O*NET information serves the needs of a very diverse user community including the public workforce investment system; career information developers; career and guidance counselors; educators at all levels; business; human resource development professionals; economists, industrial-organizational psychologists, and other social science researchers; assessment test and software application developers. There are many competing user needs and uses for O*NET information and these necessarily involve setting priorities, making trade-offs and working within budget constraints. In addition, the primary obligation of the Department is to serve the needs of the public workforce investment system and of American workers.

The following sections address some of the specific points cited in the letter.

*Expanding the O*NET-SOC Taxonomy*

With regard to expanding the taxonomy, the O*NET project has delivered to ETA research on new and emerging occupations in a number of growing sectors, including Information Technology (IT), and most recently, research on green jobs. In addition, the 2010 Standard Occupational Classification is adding some detail in the IT category, and those changes will be incorporated in future revisions of the O*NET system.

The O*NET data collection up until now has been focused on fully updating the existing O*NET-SOC taxonomy. Now that this goal has been achieved with the O*NET 13.0 database, the data collection cycle is beginning to

introduce selected new and emerging occupations, including IT. The Department is exploring options for collecting O*NET information on green jobs, possibly at an accelerated pace, under provisions of the Recovery Act.

Omitting declining occupations from any regular cycle of updating is an option that is on the table and likely, although the occupations would not be deleted unless and until they are also deleted from the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system.

Minor incongruities in the database are not necessarily due to the time-phased nature of O*NET data collection but an adjustment in rating source based on comparative research on incumbent versus analyst ratings. Work is underway at the O*NET project to prepare a data file containing a consistent set of data for the Skills descriptor from a single methodology and this could be made available and introduced into O*NET OnLine.

Funding Sufficient to Meet Certain Purposes

Regarding resources for sample size, it is not just budget, but also burden considerations that come to bear. The letter suggests two things: 1) that the sample size be sufficient to update all of the occupations annually, and 2) that the sample be sufficient to estimate O*NET attributes by occupation and by worker characteristics “such as job experience, age, or educational attainment.”

The Department concurs with the need to identify a regular updating cycle, as to whether that would be annually, biannually, or every five years—has not yet been determined. As part of its strategic planning, the Department will explore feasible options for refreshing the data on some regular planned cycle.

The latter suggestion for a breakout of O*NET ratings by worker characteristics is very ambitious. There are a number of potential issues or areas of concern around this suggestion. First, it is not even known if O*NET attribute ratings of the level of skill required on the job would vary by these worker characteristics, although it is possible that the actual level of skills possessed by workers in different demographic groups may vary. A suitable sampling frame for such data would be household-based rather than establishment-based, which is the method used for O*NET. Collecting such data might indeed require a virtual census of the workforce to obtain all of the cross-tabulations. This information need might be addressed by forging better linkages between O*NET information and data being produced through the American Community Survey on educational attainment by occupation. Finally, this appears to be more of a supply-side issue; perhaps “hard to serve” populations are best addressed not through national aggregate data, but at the level of regional economies where the skills of

workers actually can be assessed and addressed through training interventions.

Improving the Functionality of O*NET OnLine

The Department and the O*NET project continually look for ways to improve the O*NET OnLine Web application and will explore the feasibility of and potential options for providing time series information, aggregating characteristics of multiple occupations, etc. Much of this research would need to be conducted by the data collection experts on the O*NET project themselves and this would require sufficient resources to carry out such research beyond those used for data collection. Since O*NET ratings are average ratings, it remains to be seen whether it would be meaningful to develop a weighted average for aggregations of multiple detailed occupations within, for example, a SOC minor group.

Certain enhancements to O*NET OnLine might make it more complex for the majority of users, although perhaps this could be addressed by adding information to the O*NET Custom Report option, which is primarily accessed by “power” users. It might also be the case that some additional information would better lend itself to distribution through the downloadable electronic O*NET database which is available for developers.

We would like to point out the current availability of frequency distribution data for three education level categories, in the Custom Report feature of O*NET Online. The Education section of the Custom report displays data from the Current Population Survey on the percentage of workers in the occupation with: 1) High school or less, 2) Some college, and 3) Bachelor’s degree or higher. As additional American Community Survey data become available, it may be possible to expand these three categories to provide further detail or additional breakouts. We will consider whether this information should also be added to and displayed in the Summary and Details report options.

The O*NET project has accomplished a significant milestone: all of the O*NET occupations are now populated with data collected through the OMB-approved survey methodology. As a result, ETA and the O*NET project are at a suitable point to consider options and timeframes for regularizing the data collection and update cycle, to conduct some additional research in areas that have the potential to meet user needs, and to design additional useful applications, with a current priority being to maximize the use of O*NET information for skills transferability analyses for dislocated workers. To inform future planning efforts, ETA has undertaken a project with the National Academies of Science (NAS) to conduct a strategic review of the O*NET system. NAS has convened a panel of experts from a range of relevant fields, as well as representatives of key O*NET user communities. The panel has conducted two workshops at which they have heard presentations and received papers from other experts and users on their perceptions of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges for

the O*NET system. The panel is working with NAS to prepare an objective report of their findings and recommendations by the end of June 2009. Guidance from new Administration priorities, informed by the NAS input and other sources, will shape the strategic planning and budget requests for the O*NET project going forward.