

## **2021 LED Workshop - April 30, 2021**

### **Lunchtime Chat with BLS**

Video begins at 02:09:38

Keith Bailey: Welcome everyone and thank you for taking the opportunity to sit down for a lunchtime chat with Ken Robertson. Ken is the Assistant Commissioner for Industry Employment Statistics at the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Ken, Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics are engaged in many complementary and collaborative projects and initiatives, I invite you to share an overview of current and planned activities.

Ken Robertson: Absolutely thank you Keith for inviting me to this informal lunchtime chat. So over the next few minutes Keith and I will give you an update on a project that BLS and Census have been working on for some time. With that Keith if you could go to the next slide please.

So in early 2015 BLS began to explore the possibility of obtaining UI wage records for what we call production use. You know, we had a number of ideas about wage records that we thought could help improve the quality of some of our core statistics and so we convened a meeting with a small group of interested states.

And shortly after that the Office of Management and Budget kind of got wind of that and put a meeting together of BLS and a couple of groups at DOL and a couple of groups at the Department of Education and said, you know, basically gee Census already has this, you know, why don't we figure out a way to leverage this.

And so Census and BLS decided the most productive path forward was probably just for BLS and Census to meet on this to figure out, you know, what are the bumps in the road and if it was even possible to leverage these data. So we've been meeting since early 2015 to develop a sharing strategy to identify and solve roadblocks and move the project forward. If you could go the next slide please.

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So to start off with is why is BLS interested in unemployment insurance wage records. So we think that having regular production access to these data would improve the quality for some of our key statistics, you know, current employment statistics, the job openings, labor turnover survey, quarterly statistics of employment and wages and then other surveys that actually use these data, occupational and productivity data, local area unemployment statistics. So there's just a, you know, you can imagine if we can improve QCW even just a tiny bit that improvement flows through almost everything BLS does certainly on the establishment side.

You know, we think that there are probably some new data products that we could produce that, you know, of course, you know, one of our hallmarks is consistent data and consistent methods across, you know, all of the United States, you know, whether it's, you know, at the national level or the state level or the substate level. So that would be really good we think.

And one of our goals was also to support state partners by providing longitudinal and multistate wage record data for state statistical research needs. And so these were kind of our three big reasons why we thought it would be really useful for BLS to have wage records on a consistent and timely basis. And if you can go to the next slide please.

So after having some discussions and, you know, talking about roadblocks and things that we could do to move this project forward we finally determined that probably the highest value activity we could do to move this data sharing project forward was to do a joint research project. And the goal would be to develop a joint BLS and Census product that would demonstrate to the state partners the benefit of sharing the data with BLS. And what we

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decided to do is to focus on a project to enhance JOLTS. If you can go to the next slide please Keith.

So of course Job Opening and Labor Turnover Survey is a modest sized survey. We like to think of it as small but mighty. It's a fairly small survey from the BLS perspective but there is some really major data users for this. And as all the state LMI directors know we've been working for the last couple of years to put out experimental data on a quarterly basis at the state level and getting state feedback on, you know, if those look like they were being produced in a way that made sense to the states.

We are planning to roll those state data into our official statistics later on this year and at that point we'll move it from quarterly to monthly and instead of having a three month moving average we will have the individual months but we will be adding seasonally adjusted data so that there will still be a, you know, a smoother economic signal.

Of course, you know, if we could leverage the LEHD, you know, that takes that from a survey of 21,000 and it brings in a massive amount of data that covers 93% of the jobs in the US. And we know from work that Erika McEntarfer has done that there's a big correlation between the Census job to job flows and the movement that we see in JOLTS. So it seems reasonable that we ought to be able to leverage the LEHD data to produce better, you know, JOLTS data perhaps at smaller geographic levels.

So the goal for this project is simply to pick three states, you know, the goal is to pick a large, a medium and a small state and then for all of the metropolitan areas in those three states to basically use the LEHD data with the JOLTS data to produce data for those metropolitan areas. And there are some other potential research projects that we might want to look at along the way too.

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Let's see, so with that Keith if you can go to the next slide and maybe talk about this for a bit for us.

Keith: Yes thank you Ken. And just to share with everyone so there's a complete understanding, this initial research collaboration does focus on the JOLTS data from BLS and the job to job flows data from Census. Both BLS and Census are looking at the long term benefits of this type of strengthened relationship between two very significant statistical, federal statistical agencies.

So we kind of had to start somewhere and for anyone who's worked through legal agreements within government whether it's state level or federal level there has to be specificity in the project. Having kind of an open end research project was not tenable so we worked with BLS and took their recommendation to look at the JOLTS data. So this hopefully is the beginning of a very bright future in collaboration between the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau.

So the MOU negotiation which can very graciously kind of passed over how long it's been certainly predates my coming to the Census but it looks like we are getting very close to the ability to have an executed agreement but again we're being very cautious.

We recognize that we are using data that may or may not actually be within our control specifically the LEHD data is coming from our state partners via the wage record data but JOLTS has its own level of confidentiality and sensitivity. So we need to make sure that we are each being good custodians of the data and using it the most appropriate way possible and also ensuring that the confidentiality and security concerns are addressed.

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On the Census side once we do have an executed agreement that we will actually be establishing the workspace for this collaboration. Interestingly the Bureau of Labor Statistics has what they consider the BLS agent agreements which allows individual outside of the Bureau of Labor Statistics to be able to access certain levels of data beyond the public data. At Census we have the special sworn status and of course in the bureaucracy special sworn status is not equivalent to a BLS agent.

So there are those administrative tasks that we will need to iron out but Census will establish the workspace and have basically a largely remote environment where BLS and Census researchers can collaborate on that particular project.

From the research standpoint it's not just about, you know, putting data in and getting data out, it's looking do we actually have a worthwhile model, is the data valid, does it make sense, is it understandable, is it consumable. So part of it begins with the research component but as Ken was saying there is an end goal here and that goal is to actually develop public use statistics that enhance existing data or complement existing data but it does begin with the research side.

The other area that we have to focus on is the disclosure avoidance or the confidentiality protection. BLS and Census have their own unique pathways to ensure - that go through disclosure review and ensure that confidentiality and sensitivity of data is protected but we need to come together to say okay these are joint statistics there is co-ownership, co-governance of this data. We need to ensure that what we do and develop in disclosure avoidance satisfies each agency's viewpoints and needs and obligations for disclosure avoidance.

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Release of the data to the public. I've known Ken for many years, previously in my LMI role and now in my Census role, and Ken has known me for those same years obviously but both of us look for the public feedback. It's not just putting out data and having say okay let's put it on a shelf. I think each of us is committed to producing information that does meet the needs of a very, varied and diverse consumer base. So, you know, at the end of this producing the results is not the end, it's getting the feedback from the users.

The whole point of today's workshop and why we do this is to get feedback to kind of create that inspiration. We'll do the perspiration but we're looking for the inspiration from our colleagues and our data collaborators. So that is a huge piece for me and it's a simple line here in the slideshow but it's getting feedback from the consumer base and then we will turn around and incorporate that into the products to enhance them and make them more understandable and also to establish what's next with this research initiative.

So thank you Ken for taking the opportunity to come to this kind of lunchtime chat and for providing us a BLS perspective on this particular project. I would like to open it up for maybe one or two questions. Earlene I don't know if we have any chat questions as my view does not allow me to see that at present, and if there's any phone questions that we could entertain briefly.

Earlene Dowell: Operator we're ready for questions right now.

Coordinator: Thank you and again if you would like to ask a question please press Star 1 on your phone and record your name. And again to withdraw your question just press Star 2. And it will take a few moments for questions to come through.

Earlene: Thank you. I'm not showing any questions in the chat either Keith.

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Keith: Okay and in respect for the keynote address which begins in about six or seven minutes maybe we'll limit it to maybe one or two question on the phone but if we don't have questions I am happy to give you a little bit of extra time before the keynote. So maybe we'll give it another minute to see if any questions come in on the phone or the chat.

This moment of silence is brought to you by the collaborative agreement between Census and BLS.

Ken: Yes that's great Keith.

Keith: Ken thank you for your time again. We look forward to what the very near future holds for us regarding our joint research initiative. And again looking forward to the possibilities that it opens up in the future as well so thank you. We will suspend our broadcast at this time until the expected time of 12:50 Eastern Time when we hope to bring you back and introduce you to our keynote speaker. So with that I thank you and enjoy a few minutes of rest, all right.