Employee Surveys

The Survey Initiative: An Introductory Guide to Employee Research and Employee Surveys.

Basic advice on how to get the most out of an employee survey and avoid the main potential problem areas.

Why research employee opinion?

There is a growing body of evidence that HR outcomes influence business outcomes. This critical link between employee satisfaction and organisational performance has been clearly established by a number of researchers.

- Employee perceptions of the organisational environment are related to their job involvement, effort, and performance (Brown & Leigh, 1996).
- People practices have been found to have a significant impact on improvements not only in employee satisfaction, but also in the organisation's productivity and financial performance (Delaney & Huselid, 1996) (Koys, 2001).
- There is a significant amount of research demonstrating that employees have the greatest single impact on customer service (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994).
- Many aspects of organisational communication have been found to have significant influence on job satisfaction, for example communicating job responsibilities, goals and objectives, deadlines and job expectations, communicating freely and regularly, and reviewing work and salary regularly (Ilozor, 2001).

Using employee research you can establish an understanding of employee perceptions within your organisation and build on this to positively affect the bottom line. An employee survey, in particular, can be used to provide insight into what motivates your employees, what makes them like their job and enjoy their careers. The simple metric output from a survey can help you identify areas for action and allow you to track improvements once changes have been put into place.

Measurement systems have long been in place for other company metrics, such as return on investment or earnings-per-share (Norton & Kaplan, 1992) and in the same way employee survey metrics can be powerful tools in bringing about strategic change.

Benefits of conducting employee research

In our experience we have found the main benefits that can be achieved from employee research include:

- Demonstrating to employees that you are taking a genuine interest in them, their views and ideas;
- Identifying strengths and weaknesses in management performance and organisational policies, procedures and technology which will improve operational efficiency and reduce costs, as well as improving employee satisfaction;
- Improving employee retention, which will in turn reduce the costs of recruiting and retraining replacement staff and make your company a more attractive employment proposition;
- Improving the ability of employees to achieve a better balance between their work and home lives and thereby reduce absenteeism;
- Determining key contributors and barriers to delivering excellent customer service and soliciting invaluable improvement ideas from employees who deal with customers on a daily basis;
- Highlighting any issues that arise from changes in current programs and consulting on various plans, such as relocation, so that they can be managed in a proactive rather than a reactive way, with the benefits from the change being realised at the earliest possible opportunity;
- Helping HR Directors to drive key employee issues and concerns to the forefront of the organisation's management agenda.

Why use employee surveys?

An employee survey offers a reliable, cost-effective way to find out what people in your organisation really think and feel. Surveys will not only give you a deep insight into whether employees are engaged, but will also help you in determining areas of prime attention thereby enabling you to continually improve upon levels of engagement and motivation.

Employee surveys can play an important role in your wider consultation process allowing you to easily inform employees and provide you opportunities to solicit feedback on employment prospects or decisions that may lead to substantial changes in work organisation or contractual relations.

Annual and 6 monthly engagement and employee opinion surveys are by far the most popular kind of employee research activity. However, the following types of research programs are also emerging:

- Internal customer service evaluation;
- Procedure and policy evaluation;
- Stress audit;
- Work life balance audit;
- Internal communications evaluation;
- Evaluation and design of different benefits scheme;
- Managing employees through organisational change programs, for example relocation, merger or acquisition;
- Combining employee and customer satisfaction studies;
- Alignment of employees behind organisational rebranding and repositioning efforts;
- Alignment of employees behind new product development.

Aims and objectives

Before embarking on your survey, it is vital to define a set of objectives. Clear objectives linked to the business and its strategy should help to raise enthusiasm for the survey among your key influencers and decision-makers. In this way, improvements resulting from the employee research can ultimately be seen as improving customer service and overall business performance.

Setting up a project steering group including members of the senior management team, managers and employees from across the organisation will help the survey to be seen as a company-wide initiative. Steering group members can advise on aims and objectives, topic list, sample size, questionnaire design, communication and many other matters. They can help work out how best to follow up the survey, disseminate the feedback and action plan. Such groups also help to make the survey more inclusive and effective.

Top tips for conducting employee surveys

Ask yourself why you are running the survey, think about what you are trying to achieve.

Communicate the purpose of the survey; an effective communication strategy will help ensure a high level of employee participation.

Collect meaningful demographic data while ensuring anonymity to give insight and context.

Ensure each question relates directly to the survey objectives.

Consult a variety staff about the topics the survey is going to cover, perhaps by forming a steering group that includes a cross section of employees.

Keep the time required to complete the survey to a minimum (about 10-15 minutes).

Be open and honest with the results and commit to feeding them back.

Don’t try to action everything that the survey throws up; pick two or three key items.

Set targets for improvement and periodically revisit them to ensure that any remedial work you do is having the desired effect.

Selecting the right approach

The objectives of your survey will not only provide focus for the project but they will determine the best approach to use.

Quantitative or qualitative research

Both methodologies can be highly effective in employee research. It is essential to ensure that the correct methodology is used for the type of research being conducted.

Qualitative research is most appropriate when:

- The research involves relatively small groups of people;
- You are looking to pursue a subject in real detail;
- You are looking for the flexibility to move between subjects dependent on how participants respond;
- You are attempting to determine strength of feeling on a certain subject;
- You are trying to understand root causes of a feeling rather than just the symptoms of issues;
- You are trying to seek the connections between issues.

Face-to-face individual interviews and focus groups are the most common forms of qualitative techniques used in employee research.

Quantitative research is most appropriate when:

- Large numbers of people need to be included in the research;
- The research needs to cover a large number of different subjects;
- It is important to have robust numerical data;
- You need to have measurable comparison data between different groups;
- You want to be able to compare performance against other external organisations;
- You want to identify correlation with other research data (e.g. customer satisfaction data);
- You want to undertake some form of advanced statistical analysis on the results (e.g. regression or correlation analysis).

Employee surveys are the most common form of quantitative research.

There are occasions when both methodologies can be effectively combined. For example, in an employee opinion survey, you may decide to use focus groups before designing the survey in order to determine the survey content and/or pilot questionnaire. Then you may also want to use qualitative research after the survey data has been collected to better understand the meaning behind the quantitative results.

Census or sample

Having defined your survey objectives and selected your approach, the next thing to consider is whether there is a need to survey all employees or just a sample of them.

Generally organisations tend to conduct census' employee opinion surveys. This is mainly due to the need to drive through improvement action planning at local levels, which require frontline managers to be provided with their own reports. By undertaking a sample survey, there may either be not enough responses to provide a report or the number of responses may represent too small a proportion of the whole employee population to be considered statistically robust.

Online or paper surveys

Increasingly, organisations are using online web-based methods of surveying their employees.

This type of survey offers organisations a number of benefits:

- It is cost effective and simpler to administer than a paper-based survey;
- Real time response rates are easily available;
- Unique access passwords can prevent employees from completing more than one survey;

- Employees can be routed to certain questions based on their responses;
- You can ensure all respondents answer every question they are asked.

However, consideration should be given to the following questions:

- Do all employees have, or have access to, a PC that has external Internet access?
- Are all of the employees sufficiently computer literate to complete an online survey?
- Do you have field-based employees and, if so, how would they complete an online survey?
- Can your IT Department provide the necessary assistance with the survey?
- Is the culture in place for it and would it adversely affect the response rate if the survey were online?

If some of these problems exist, then it may be more appropriate to initially administer a mostly paper-based survey with a small scale online pilot in the most appropriate parts of the organisation. In future years, the online element can be increased until it completely replaces paper-based completion.

There are alternative methods for administering surveys such as email surveys, one to one interviews, telephone interviews, polling stations, voting systems and comments boxes. All of these methods have been used to canvass employee opinion however the most popular remain paper and online surveys.

The Survey Initiative offers both online surveys and paper-based surveys (or a mixture of the two) that are customised to each individual company's needs.

Top tips for online surveys

Do not use too many colours or fonts. They are distracting. On the other hand, bolding, italicising, and changing the colours of key words, used appropriately, can make your questions easier to understand. Using colour and font size to make instructions distinct from question text can make your questionnaire easier to follow.

Always specify a background colour, even if it is white (usually a good choice). Some browsers may show a background colour you do not expect, if you do not specify one. Background images usually make text harder to read, even when they make a page more attractive at first glance.

Use graphics sparingly. Graphics will slow the download time and frustrate users.

Make sure you do not require people to scroll horizontally to view part of the survey page. Most people find horizontal scrolling annoying.

Include an introduction or welcome page. Explain the reason for the survey. Put instructions at the point they are needed, instead of grouping them on the first page.

Make sure your page and question layouts are consistent. Do not put answer choices on the right for some questions and on the left for others. Use colour consistently. For example, always use the same colour to represent an instruction.

Recognise that requiring that questions be answered will likely increase the number of people who drop out of a survey in the middle. Whenever you require an answer make sure the available options include all possible answers, including "don't know" or "not applicable".

Allow space for long replies to comment type questions. Some people will type in longer answers on a Web page than they would write on a paper questionnaire or say to an interviewer.

Drop-down lists save space on the screen, but be careful using them. Lists that require scrolling to see some choices can bias the results. Use them only if there is only one possible choice a person can make.

When you have finished creating the survey, test it thoroughly. Make sure that all the pages look as you wish and that all skips, randomisations and other logic work as you intend.

Communication

Employee buy-in is critical to the success of the survey. If they believe that improvements will result from the survey, they are more likely to participate by completing it and will become actively involved in the follow-up improvement action planning process.

Plan a communication programme that begins well in advance and reaches a peak just before the questionnaires go out.

- Tell people in advance about the study, why it's being carried out, how it will affect them and what they can expect to happen as a result. Look to get the MD or CEO to sponsor the project to give it face validity.
- Issue a reminder during the completion period. Stress the importance of a high response rate and emphasise both confidentiality and the promise of feedback.
- After the survey ensure you feedback the results to employees. Use the in-house newsletter, notice boards, intranet and the briefing system to publish the highlights.
- The period between surveys is important for determining appropriate action, if any, and for communicating any actions back to employees. It is important to link the improvements back to the survey as many employees believe that little or no improvements are generated from employee surveys.

Branding the survey and subsequent actions with a name and/or a logo is another way of raising the profile and linking the improvement actions to it.

Consider the different messages you may need to convey to different groups and the most appropriate communication channels for reaching those groups. For example, it is important for immediate supervisors to be positive role models for the survey so that when they interact with their staff, they demonstrate active encouragement of the survey, a commitment to administer it properly and to act on the results.

Designing the survey

Once the aims and objectives have been set, and a general approach agreed, the next step is survey design. There are at least four steps in this process:

1. Developing an agreed topic list - this is simply a list of the areas to be investigated (for example, communication, benefits, training, management style and values).

2. Qualitative research - talk with a sample of managers and employees in focus groups or face-to-face interviews this will help to ensure that you are covering topics important to all staff.

3. Finalising the topic list - you may decide to enlarge, reduce or change the original list. It is even possible that the pilot research may have given you all the information you need, but if not, the next step will be to draft a questionnaire.

4. Questionnaire design - the design of the questionnaire can have as much influence over the response rate as the method of completion.

The elements of a good questionnaire are as follows:

- Each question should directly relate to the survey objectives;
- Questions should provide relevant and actionable information to the organisation – avoid giving the impression there is a 'hidden agenda';
- It shouldn't be possible to identify individuals from their responses: confidentiality should be guaranteed;
- Nevertheless, collect basic demographic data length of service, job grade, location to give the data meaning and context;
- It should take about 10-15 minutes to complete;
- Employees should be able to reasonably answer all the questions;
- Questions should be unambiguous - address only one point per question. Don't, for example, include a statement such as `My training for this

job was relevant and effective'. Use only one of these two terms.
- It should strike the right balance between addressing the needs of employees and the needs of the organisation;
- Questions that allow comparison of results with other external organisations can be useful at the reporting stage;
- Questions that will allow employees to provide improvement ideas and suggestions in the form of verbatim comments are also useful.

Survey completion

Online surveys can generally be completed in a one to two week timeframe, although participation should be monitored in real time so as to decide when to send reminders and thereby maximise employee participation.

A two to three week period should be allowed for survey paper-based completion, with an additional week set aside (but not advertised internally) for the inevitable late returns. This will allow time for employees who are on holiday or away from the office for another reason to participate in the survey.

Consideration should also be given to whether employees on maternity leave, sickness absence and contract/agency staff should be invited to participate in the survey.

If a paper-based survey is being administered, then the distribution method needs to be carefully considered so that the maximum possible response rate is achieved. There is no right or wrong answer or blanket method that must be used and the most suitable method will depend on the organisation, its structure and culture.

Results analysis and reporting

There are many different ways of analysing, cutting and reporting results and each organisation has to decide individually on the best method for their needs. Some key things to consider are:

Generally, the best way to analyse a survey is for one person to go through all the data in detail and then produce a summary of the key issues – avoiding a lengthy written report. This can then be presented to the steering group who can request any further analyses they feel are necessary.

It is important to report the results to employees as quickly as you can after the end of the survey completion period. This will ensure that the momentum and interest that has already been generated will be maintained.

Ensure you focus mainly on the organisation's strengths and the implications for action - not the bad news. And wherever possible, present relevant local information to managers, as well as the strategic, organisation-wide picture.

Face-to-face feedback of results is the preferred communication method and, although this will probably not be logistically possible at an overall organisational level, it is essential for the feedback of local team results. This will allow employees to ask questions, suggest the root causes behind the results and possible ways to improve.

How do you compare?

In order to put the results into context it may be useful to compare with other organisations or with those results achieved in previous surveys.

Comparisons with other businesses are interesting and can provide a useful indicator of how well you’re doing in some important areas. The Survey Initiative maintains a database of normative scores to key questionnaire items.

From a management perspective, it's also very important to be able to see how the results achieved in the survey compare with previous investigations. Comparing your results in this way will allow you to track the success of any policy changes or action taken as a result of the survey.

Setting improvement actions

Although improvement action planning is the most important part of the survey process, it is also the activity that a number of organisations fail to deliver against. You may consider using statistical techniques such as factor and regression analysis, these can allow you to highlight the areas impacting on employee engagement and motivation and help to focus action planning.

Indices can be calculated in key areas; for example if communication has been identified as an area for improvement in your survey, you can set a target for the average communication score for the next survey.

Setting and then publishing these targets can have a powerful effect on both management and employees alike. If managers know they are to be measured against specific standards they will take follow-up action much more seriously. And if employees can see a public commitment to change and improvement, they will play their part more energetically.

Follow up action

Ideally, each manager (from senior management to supervisor) should work with their team to identify and prioritise two to three areas requiring improvement – these could include the output from any statistical analysis or the global targets but can also be identified from the team's local results.

The team then need to develop and implement an improvement action plan that is regularly reviewed. It is useful to document the agreed improvement actions and how they will be delivered. This summary can then be used to review the progress of the plan as actions are taken as result of the plan.

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Further information

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