



How to Get Great Results from Employee Surveys in the Workplace

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Introduction

In most organisations the people it employs are its most expensive asset and have the greatest impact on performance. But the workforce is not always the best understood or looked after asset.

As an organisation grows, it is harder for senior management to keep in touch with the people it employs. Like customers, when the numbers increase it is much harder for individual managers to understand employees' needs and feelings without some form of regular systemised feedback. Measuring employee satisfaction, motivation and commitment is as important as customer satisfaction and loyalty research.

Whilst surveys are no replacement for hands-on people management, regular workplace surveys ensure senior management stay in touch with the workforce and regularly benchmark their performance in terms of employee satisfaction. Workplace surveys also provide a structured and effective tool for validating and monitoring HR strategies.

This paper provides a practical guide for designing and fielding workplace surveys that will help to ensure management keeps in touch with its employees.

Why conduct Workplace Surveys?

The regular use of workplace surveys enables management to monitor trends and measure performance against specific issues and/or improvement initiatives. Although employees and business objectives will change over time, an annual workplace survey provides a routine health check and can also act as an early warning system that alerts the organisation to specific problems that could undermine workplace performance and employee motivation.

Organisations with more than 100 employees should survey its people every year. Smaller organisations should still consider the topics covered by a workplace survey but can probably conduct a less formal assessment as part of its normal internal communication processes.

What is a Workplace Survey?

A workplace survey, in simple terms, is a "self-completion" questionnaire sent to every employee in the organisation. The questions are designed to quantify each individual's views on their workplace, their overall satisfaction with the organisation as a place to work and their opinions on the issues that undermine or promote workplace effectiveness.

Internet vs. Paper

The internet is a very effective channel for collecting employee opinion because it offers respondents a fast and anonymous means of providing their feedback. Using the internet also has benefits to the employer because printing and postage costs are significantly reduced, the responses are quickly received and do not need to be data entered, thus increasing accuracy and saving further costs.

However, some employees may not have internet access (or want to use this channel) so the opportunity to complete a paper questionnaire should also be offered. If paper questionnaires are provided, care should be taken to ensure all responses are processed by a third-party to ensure employee anonymity.

Questionnaire Content

Workplace survey design need not be “rocket science”. Anyone who has studied Abraham Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs”¹ will have a good idea of what is important to workplace satisfaction.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow’s theory is particularly important to workplace surveys because it reminds us that it is not just money and rewards that matter but also respect and interaction.

A productive and effective workplace survey is likely to include questions about:

1. Safe and comfortable working conditions
2. The right tools to do the job
3. Fairness in financial rewards and promotion opportunities
4. Recognition of good work
5. Good communication both up and down the organisation
6. Trust in senior management to drive the organisation forward whilst also looking after the interests of employees
7. A team spirit across all parts of the organisation to get things done for the good of the organisation and its customers
8. A clearly defined organisational and employee focus on customers
9. The opportunity to develop and use new skills
10. Pride in working for a successful organisation

¹ Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, published his “Theory of Human Motivation” in 1943 and is generally regarded as the father of modern motivational theory. His “Hierarchy of Needs” chart is still widely used to explain the five levels of human motivation.

Quantitative or Qualitative?

Surveys conducted online are usually designed to collect “quantitative” responses – most workplace survey questions will provide results from a range of prescribed responses. But there is also a need for a few “qualitative” questions that seek verbatim comment from participants. These questions should be used sparingly because open/verbatim questions require more effort to fill in, and more effort to review and analyse. But they serve two important purposes; they capture additional detail that can help to understand/interpret quantitative scores. Secondly, they provide a safety net to capture anything important that may not be picked up from the quantitative questions.

A typical “catch-all” question at the end of a questionnaire might be: “Is there anything else, not previously asked in this study that you consider undermines your performance in the workplace?”

Questionnaire Design

Once a broad outline of questions has been agreed, the next step is to present them in a logical and understandable order and in a format that is visibly attractive and user-friendly. Attention to the following five guidelines will help to achieve this:

1. Keep the number of questions to a minimum – as a rule of thumb, anything over thirty should need special justification.
2. Ensure that the wording is clear, concise, understandable and not capable of misinterpretation.
3. Delegate final responsibility for the content to one trusted individual. There can be conflicting demands for questions from different parts of the organisation that may lead to an overly long and confusing survey. Someone needs to coordinate such requests and have the final say on content.
4. Follow a logical structure of key topics.
5. Include specific issue questions (i.e. addressing one-off situations) only if really relevant and keep them to a minimum

Confidentiality

Respondent anonymity is very important for employee surveys. In order to ensure accuracy of answers given, as well as to maximise response rates, participants need to know that their feedback cannot be directly attributed to them and (more importantly) they will not suffer in any way from giving negative feedback.

This is easily achieved by giving an undertaking to all employees before the survey starts that individual results will not be identifiable. A process must also be established to ensure that no one within the organisation has access to individual responses. Therefore, it is essential that at the very least data entry and any printed questionnaire handling is outsourced to an independent contractor.

There may be concerns about the online completion of questionnaires as it is relatively easy to identify the computer used to complete a survey. Here it is important to stress that an independent contractor is managing the process and give a highly visible undertaking that all information collected will be treated as confidential and no individual responses will be disclosed to anyone within the organisation. This should also be covered in the Privacy Statement and highlighted in invitations sent to participants.

Whilst processes can be established to protect individual answers, management must also treat overall responses with respect. It is important, for example, not to start a witch hunt if some of the information the study provides does not agree with management's views.

Response Rates

There is often a concern about how many people will complete a survey. In an ideal world a census of all employees (everybody!) should be the goal but in reality this can be difficult to achieve and the aim should be to get as high a response rate as possible.

Surveylab's experience varies from 66% to 95% but in general terms a response rate of around 70% should be sufficient to represent the majority of views for all but the smallest organisations.

Response rates may be influenced by the culture of the organisation, the openness of management and the degree of commitment employees already have. If there has been limited experience of workplace surveys in the past or earlier attempts have not been well received the potential response rates may be lower and tactics should be considered to maximise participation (see the info box for a few tips).

Tips to increase response rates:

- Communicate the survey objectives in advance**
 Have line managers brief their teams positively and sell the benefits of the study (rather than demanding participation). If there is a works council or trade union representation then ensure that they are fully briefed in advance and seek their support in promoting the study.
- Demonstrate that participation will improve the workplace**
 Promise that employee feedback will improve the workplace for the benefit of all. Once results are available distribute a summary report together with any action being taken throughout the organisation.
- Create an attractive and user friendly questionnaire**
 Effort spent on the appearance of the survey, clarity, appropriateness and length of the questionnaire will have a direct impact on response levels.
- Schedule email invitations to maximise attention**
 Send email invitations when they are most likely to be read and acted upon. This may vary from organisation to organisation but higher responses are achieved from sending invitations during the working day and avoiding Friday afternoons!
- Allow sufficient time for responses to be collected**
 The majority of responses are usually received within 48 hours of fielding, but keep the survey open for at least three weeks to allow for people on holiday or sick leave.
- Send a reminder**
 Near to the survey close date, send a follow-up email to those who have not responded.
- Consider incentives**
 As a rule, incentives are not necessary or appropriate for encouraging responses to a workplace survey. If, however, there has been bad experience with such surveys in the past or it is known there is a lack of employee commitment then it maybe worth considering some form of incentive. This could be in the form of a charitable donation based on so much per response or a prize draw for a weekend break or the latest electronic gadget.



Scoring Criteria

There can be endless debate about how to score the questions being asked. Should there be numeric or a descriptive score? If numeric should it be a three-point, five-point or ten-point scale? If descriptive what words should be used? Should there be a mid-point score or not? Should scores go low to high or high to low? There is no right or wrong answer apart from being consistent across the questionnaire.

But for workplace surveys we prefer a ten-point numeric scale with descriptors at each end. This allows respondents a greater degree of variation in their response and improves the accuracy of the results.

Section 1 - My Supervisor/Manager
 Questions in this section relate specifically to your immediate supervisor/manager (that is, the person who is responsible for your performance management review).

My Supervisor/Manager ...	Strongly Disagree										Strongly Agree	Don't know
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
1. listens to my concerns	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. treats me with respect	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. keeps me informed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. is a positive role model	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. always challenges inappropriate behaviour	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. explains clearly what s/he expects of me in	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Example ten-point scale with descriptors:

Analysis and Reporting Results

This paper has discussed the content and design of a workplace survey, but equally important is how the responses are analysed and reported. To make the most use of the survey data, reporting should enable management to understand and review the satisfaction, expectations and issues concerning their employees.

Consider how the results need to be analysed. Responses could be linked to demographics for length of employment, age of employee, division or location. Comparisons with overall organisation scores will help to pinpoint the issues in specific regions or departments of the organisation. Grouping related questions into topics can readily summarise strengths and weaknesses, which potentially can be drilled down to a department level.

Online reporting offers major advantages over printed reports: time-consuming number crunching is eliminated (or significantly reduced) and the results can be looked at in different ways to get a fuller understanding of employee opinion in the workplace.

A final word of advice here. Plan your reporting requirements when designing the questionnaire. Early consideration of how the results will be presented will help maximise the accuracy of the questionnaire as well as ensuring that reporting is meaningful and unambiguous.

Surveylab's Approach

Needless to say, while discussing "workplace surveys" we have been describing Surveylab's approach to workplace surveys. In most scenarios, we use a template as the framework for any new employee survey, customising its content with the Client's objectives and needs of its organisation. Clients are also welcome to use and tailor our template themselves to design their perfect workplace survey.

Similarly online reporting can be tailored to meet individual corporate requirements

To learn more about Surveylab's workplace survey offer, please visit www.surveylab.co.uk/workplace-surveys.asp. More articles and guides about designing and fielding online surveys are also available on our website.

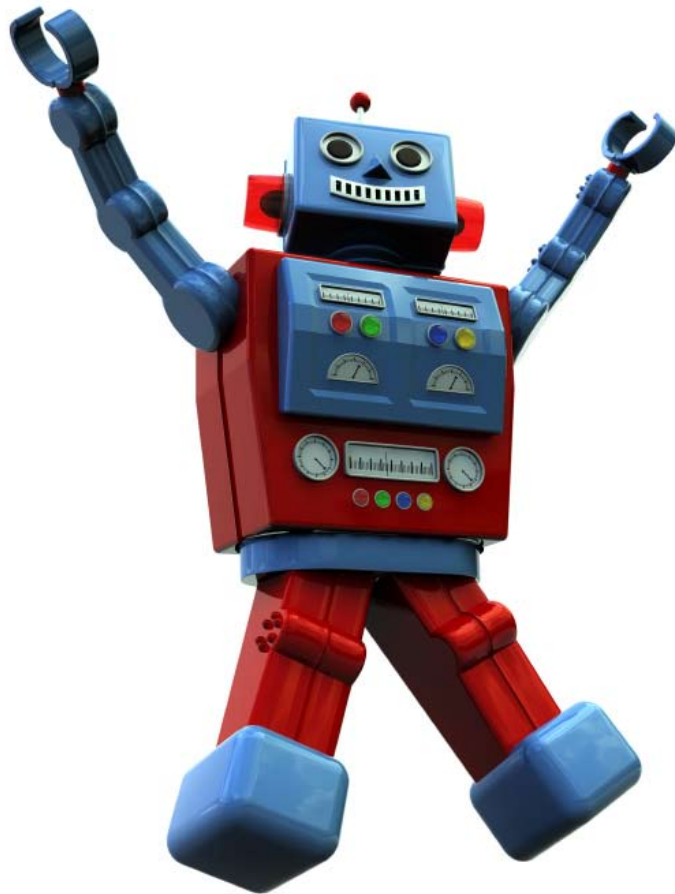


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