

# Employee Satisfaction Surveys; Debunking the Benchmarking Myth

## Summary

Many employers are anxious to “put their Employee Satisfaction Survey results in context” by benchmarking their results against other employers. Far from being helpful, however, such comparisons are often deeply flawed, and dangerously misleading.

## Temptation

When interpreting the results of their Employee Satisfaction Survey, many employers want to compare them with other employers' results to see if they are doing better or worse than the competition. This understandable urge is encouraged by some suppliers, who make much of their ability to provide normative comparisons to "put your results into context".

## Compare like with like?

We have all been taught from high school maths lessons onwards to make sure we compare apples with apples but like-for-like comparisons with other employers' surveys are almost impossible, which means that normative comparisons are often misleading and sometimes positively dangerous.

There are several reasons for this.

## Expectation

The main problem concerns the treatment employees have come to expect from their employer, which may be very different from one employer to another.

Satisfaction measures are a function of people's experience compared with what they expected. Given exactly the same experience, people with lower expectations produce higher satisfaction scores than those whose expectations were higher. We don't know how other employers' people expected to be treated, so even when we have our benchmark data, this crucial part of the context is still missing.

Imagine a visit to a DIY outlet where you have been used to the sullen cashier throwing your purchases from one place to another, mumbling the total and handling the entire transaction without making eye contact or cracking a smile. On this occasion, though, when you get to the checkout you are greeted with a smile, your goods are handled carefully and placed in bags, payment is accompanied by "please" and "thank you", and at the end of it all, you are sent on your way with a smiling "have a good day". Then somebody stops you and asks you to rate your satisfaction with the transaction. You would probably give a high rating.

Now imagine yourself in a shop where the service I just described is the norm. Here, you are accustomed to having a helpful, courteous assistant to treat you like a valued customer. Imagine that this time, you have exactly the same experience as you had in the DIY place before; and that somebody asks you again, to rate the quality of service. This time, it was nothing extraordinary. You might give a good rating, but not especially so. In fact you might not give as high a rating as you gave to the DIY place. This is because satisfaction is a function of the experience we have, **in the context of what we expected.**

So if you find that your Employee Satisfaction Survey results fall short of whatever benchmark you are offered, that might be because some of the employees in the benchmark had been a bit surprised to be treated so well, while your people have learned to take it for granted.

## Other possible problems

The different expectations of employees of different employers will always cause benchmarking comparisons to be suspect. The following problems won't always apply, but they might. And you may not be told about it.

## Question wording

The questions in your survey questionnaire may not be expressed in exactly the same way as in the benchmark surveys. Any change to the wording leads to different responses, so comparisons with “equivalent” questions are unreliable.

Very subtle changes to the wording of a question can bring about profound changes to the way that people respond. Sometimes, they can completely reverse the result of the research. This is an old example, but it makes the point.

	Yes %	No %	Don't know %
Do you think the United States will succeed in staying out of the war?	44	30	26
Do you think the United States will go into the war before it is over?	33	41	26

*D Rugg & H Cantril (1944) "The wording of questions" in H Cantril (ed.) Gauging Public Opinion. Princeton University Press*

This was a “split half” study, in which half the informants were asked the question one way, and half the other way. In each case, the percentage predicting that the USA would join in the Second World War is in the shaded column, and we could conclude that among those who had any opinion on the subject the majority thought it would, or thought it wouldn’t, depending on how we put the question.

If the benchmark data you compare your Employee Satisfaction Survey results with is based on the use of **exactly** the same wording as in your questionnaire, this concern clearly doesn’t apply, but if it also employs “equivalent” items, or questions, the comparisons could be misleading.

## Question sequence

The response to any question is influenced by the conditioning effect of questions which precede it in the questionnaire. Only by using the whole questionnaire in exactly the same form can we be sure that comparisons are meaningful.

Imagine that we put these two items in a questionnaire.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	In between	Agree	Strongly agree
For me generally, life is good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My relationship with my spouse or partner is good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

We would expect to get different answers to the two items, because the two questions are about different aspects of informants’ lives.

Now imagine that we put the questions the other way round, like this.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	In between	Agree	Strongly agree
My relationship with my spouse or partner is good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
For me generally, life is good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

This time, the answers we get will not be so different. By asking the specific question about the relationship first, we narrow informants' perception when they try to respond to the wider question. Having been asked about our "significant other", it is hard to keep in proportion this morning's harsh words, or loving farewell and give an objective, rounded answer to the question about life in general.

Even if the normative data you compare your Employee Satisfaction Survey results with is based on the identical item wording, do you know what questions preceded it in each case, and what effect those preceding questions might have had on informants' responses to this one? Unless your survey and every survey in the normative data use exactly the same entire questionnaire, you are not comparing apples with apples.

### Response frames

Although the same question or statement might be used, employees might have been asked to respond on a different scale. Even assuming a common approach, such as an agreement scale like the one in the last example, there is no standard number of points on the scale, and different employers may have offered four, five, seven, or sometime nine or ten points on the scale.

A common response to this problem is to convert all the scales to a common base, such as a scale of 100 points but converting scales is a rough and ready process, so the result will be rough and ready comparisons.

## What will you do with benchmarking data?

If your results appear to be less good than the benchmark, you will presumably make strenuous efforts to improve. But if you operate a policy of continual improvement, you were doing that anyway, without any benchmarking comparisons to prompt it. And if your results are better than the benchmark, will you relax and not attempt to improve? Of course not.

So what is the purpose of the benchmarking comparisons? Are they any more than a "Nice to know"?

Your Employee Satisfaction Survey should produce Management Information about how your people FEEL about being employed in your organisation. That means information which drives management interventions which improve the organisation's attainment of its objectives, including, for commercial organisations, improving profit. An Employee Satisfaction Survey which produces data which is nice to know, but doesn't lead to action, hasn't earned its keep. Normative comparisons too often fall into the "Nice to know" category.

### The true value of survey results

The information which is most valuable in informing management decision-making comes from the internal comparisons your survey should permit. When you can demonstrate a statistically significant difference of opinion, or different level of satisfaction between one department and

another, or between groups defined by length of service, age group, gender, ethnicity, location etc.; that difference can help you make the case for initiatives to bring about improvement, targeted on the areas where improvement is most needed.

You can identify areas where something is working better than elsewhere; investigate the reasons and then transfer the effective practices to other parts of your organisation. You can target and improve the areas most in need of improvement. For more advice on deciding what to do to address the findings of a survey, see our article, [Prioritising interventions following an Employee Satisfaction Survey](#).

Then after an interval, you can use your survey questionnaire again, to produce a whole new set of data and as well as the comparisons between groups, you will be able to make comparisons between this time and last time, to measure the change your initiatives have produced.

Used in this way, your Employee Satisfaction Survey becomes a valuable source of Management Information which facilitates effective management and improvement of your relationship with your people. Benchmarking makes no contribution to that process.

**Versions of this article have appeared in the following journals:**

[Training and Coaching Today](#)

[Human Capital Management](#)

[Human Resource Management International Digest](#)

**More Literature from [Quantify](#) about Employee Satisfaction Surveys:**

[Your Employee Satisfaction Survey](#)

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[Employee Satisfaction Survey; Do it Right](#)

[Maximise Response Rate to your Employee Satisfaction Survey](#)

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