

# Employee Satisfaction Surveys

## Do it Right

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## **Disappointing Employee Surveys**

Many Employee Satisfaction Surveys disappoint their sponsors by achieving little or no benefit for the organisation. This is wasteful and unnecessary because handled appropriately an Employee Satisfaction Survey is a source of valuable Management Information to drive initiatives for change which improve corporate performance, efficiency and customer satisfaction.

For commercial organisations this leads to improved market share and bigger profit. Non-profit organisations can deliver more and better service per pound spent.

To get the most out of any management technique, we need to benefit from others' experience and stick to the relevant dos and don'ts. An Employee Satisfaction Survey is no different and this article describes some frequently overlooked essential steps and warns of some pitfalls, and how to avoid them.

### **Get the CEO's commitment**

Without commitment from the CEO (and any management body) to make changes indicated by the survey results, the process is at best handicapped, and at worst doomed. Several of the pitfalls which follow become unavoidable if the process was begun without the wholehearted support of the CEO. There is no point in the survey if it leads to no change, so it follows that you must have commitment from the top to make changes when they are indicated.

### **Communicate**

Don't let the survey come out of the blue; publicise it energetically in advance to create expectation both of the questionnaire's arrival and of change as a consequence of what is learned. Emphasise the changes for the better that have happened following any previous survey. There have been some, haven't there?

Make a point of the CEO's commitment to change things that this survey shows need changing. This will encourage people to see the exercise as worthwhile, respond, and expect something to happen as a result.

### **Give the questionnaire the investment it justifies**

The value of a survey increases each time you repeat it because as well as indicating areas you can improve, the trend will provide evidence of the improvements already achieved. The less you change the questionnaire between one survey event and the next, the more reliable will be the trend data you gather. So it makes sense to do all you can to get it right first time.

The value of the results will depend on the wording of the questions. Questions need to identify strengths and diagnose any problems but when a problem is identified the results must also provide an indication of what, if anything needs to change. A useful discipline to apply to every question in the questionnaire is to ask what action you would take if the response was very favourable, or very unfavourable. If you can't say; the question needs revising. If there is nothing you could, or would do; probably the question should be left out altogether.

### **Provide questions to gather the data required to classify responses**

The chief value you can get from the survey will come from comparisons of results between groups of people, (department A is happier than department B) or between different times (people are happier now than they were a year ago). To make comparisons between groups, you need to include questions which place people into different groups. You should consider asking people to classify themselves by Department / section; by Location; by Job type; by Grade; by Age group; by Length of service and by Sex. You may well have other relevant ways of classifying employees.

Some people may say that with many such classification questions, their pattern of ticks will be unique, so even if you have promised anonymity, for anyone who knows the organisation, they might as well have written their name on their questionnaire.

This is not a good argument for removing the classification questions – you need them. It is a good reason to reassure people about the precautions you have taken to ensure their anonymity, so let us consider that now.

### **Convince people that they can reply and still remain anonymous**

If the results are going to be useful, the questionnaire must invite people to criticise the way they are currently treated by the organisation, and by their manager. People will not respond honestly if they think their manager might find out what they said, and then confront them, demanding that they justify their opinion. People need to be confident that their views will only reach their manager in aggregated form. The best way to achieve this is to have an independent, external destination for people to send their response to and a credible promise that individual replies will not be reported to you. Even then, some people may be wary, but most will be reassured.

### **Express scale results as averages, not as percentages**

You might invite employees to tick one of several boxes on a scale for satisfaction or agreement for example. If you offer five points on the scale, they might be labelled *Strongly disagree*; *Disagree*; *In between*; *Agree*; and *Strongly agree*. We often see such results summarised by giving the percentage who ticked, say, the *Agree* and *Strongly agree* options. This makes the statistics simpler to work out but it treats *Agree* and *Strongly agree* as if they were equivalent, and *Strongly disagree*; *Disagree* and *In between* as if they, too, were all the same. This approach would fail to report any difference between the following sets of results although the second set is clearly not as much in agreement as the first.

<i>% Strongly disagree</i>	<i>% Disagree</i>	<i>% In between</i>	<i>% Agree</i>	<i>% Strongly agree</i>
10	10	10	10	60
10	10	10	60	10

A better way to represent the results with a single number would be to assign each option a value, and work out the average result. If we treat *Strongly disagree* as worth 1 and the other options as 2, 3, 4 up to *Strongly agree* at 5, the average results for these two sets of responses are 4.0 and 3.5 respectively, on the scale of 1 to 5. If you like, you can express the average as if the scale had been 0 to 100 instead of 1 to 5. This makes comparisons easier, and gives a better feel for how much better one result is than another. Expressed this way, the two results are 75.0 and 62.5; clearly different.

### **Make arrangements for the results to be available a week or two after the survey closes**

One of the favourite get-outs of Government Ministers challenged to justify an unacceptable statistic is to say that it is out of date. “Yes, things were awful then, but we have changed lots of things since then and everything is alright now.” When faced with an unpalatable truth about your organisation, some managers who prefer not to have to do anything about it might resort to similar arguments if the survey data seems a bit out of date, so the sooner the results are available, the more convincing will be any argument for change which they lead to.

### **Be sure you understand the significance of any differences you detect**

When there is a difference between results for one group and another, it may indicate a real difference of opinion, or it may be just the variation inherent in the sampling process. As long as you can't get every employee to respond, each group result summarises a sample of the total

employees in the group, so it is just an estimate of the result you would have got if every member of the group had replied. However you express the results, you need to calculate the confidence interval which applies to the difference and only treat as significant those differences which exceed the relevant confidence interval. Otherwise, you could be investing time and money in addressing differences which are just sampling error.

### **Make sure the results are presented authoritatively**

Those managers who would prefer not to hear that aspects of the way they deal with their people could be improved will accept the need for change more readily if the news comes from an authoritative, disinterested specialist who can explain what they mean, which are significant and which are not than if they are told by a colleague they interact with regularly, on all sorts of other matters.

### **Don't be seduced by the illusion of benchmarking or "normative" comparisons**

It is tempting to seek to compare results with other employers but meaningful comparisons are virtually impossible, so comparisons are likely to be dangerously misleading.

The satisfaction rating different people give for an identical experience will vary according to what they had expected. If the experience was better than they had expected, they will give a higher score than they would if the experience was much as they had expected it to be; and therefore unremarkable. You might easily get satisfaction scores lower than a benchmark group just because experience has taught your people to expect to be treated well, while for the benchmark people, it came as a bit of a surprise.

Also, the way people answer a question is influenced by the questions which precede it in the questionnaire. If you and all the benchmark employers are not using the entire, identical questionnaire, comparisons with their results are invalid. Finally, how significant are any differences? To work that out, you would need to know the sample size and dispersion (preferably the standard deviation) in the benchmark sample, as well as your own. For more about benchmarking, read our article [Debunking the Benchmarking Myth](#).

### **Don't conduct a survey and then do nothing with the results**

Having conducted your survey, be sure to publish at least a summary of the results to the employees. When you have decided on them, or preferably developed them through consultation with the employees involved, announce the initiatives you are introducing in response to what you learned, and monitor the change to ensure it actually happens. Running a survey isn't just a means of gathering data. It also influences people's perceptions and expectations.

The fact that you ran a survey suggests to people that you care about how they feel. Not unnaturally, they expect that something will change as a consequence of the survey's findings. If that expectation is disappointed, the survey will be perceived as a cynical piece of window-dressing rather than a sincere attempt to gather information about how people feel; with predictable consequences for the response rate if you should ever choose to repeat the exercise.

### **Don't try to handle it internally**

As a supplier of survey consultancy and support services, you would expect me to say that but it isn't said just out of self-interest. You will get a better questionnaire. Employees will be more confident about their anonymity, so you will get more honest feedback and a better response rate which means more convincing results. Results will be delivered more quickly, better-presented and easier to interpret forming a more convincing basis for the change for the better which is the object of the exercise. And although you will have a consultant's bill to pay, we don't all charge the earth,

so the fee might be less than you imagine. It may actually cost your organisation more to distract some of your own people from the work they are actually employed for, to tackle the tasks an Employee Satisfaction Survey requires, tasks for which they are probably ill-equipped by their experience, skills and training.

You wouldn't look around for somebody in the office and ask them to have a go at installing a new basin in the staff toilet or a new telephone system because that would run the risk of leaks or crossed wires. Why risk it with a survey among your most valuable asset; your people?

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

[Human Resource Management International Digest](#)

[Human Capital Management](#)

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

[Your Employee Satisfaction Survey](#)

[Why run an Employee Satisfaction Survey](#)

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

[Prioritising interventions following an Employee Satisfaction Survey](#)

[Debunking the Benchmarking Myth](#); the pitfalls of failing to compare like with like