

# Maximise Response Rate to your Employee Satisfaction Survey

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## Feelings

**People's feelings about their experience at work matter because they affect the way they perform, how they deal with clients and ultimately the organisation's success or failure. So it is important to manage employees' feelings.**

**You can't manage something you can't measure.**

**The things that get measured are the things that get done.**

An Employee Satisfaction Survey should provide valuable management information about how your people feel and you can learn stuff from a survey that people won't tell you otherwise.

A survey might discover a department where satisfaction is at a higher level than elsewhere, and if you can find out why, you can transfer some of its excellent practices to other departments and achieve an overall improvement. You may find some aspects of people's experience at work which are perceived differently by informants of one gender or one ethnic origin, providing a warning of an issue which threatens your organisation's diversity credentials. You might identify issues which are leading to high turnover and which you can address to achieve significant improvement.

For a fully argued case for an Employee Satisfaction Survey see our article [Why run an Employee Satisfaction Survey](#).

## Response rate

Whatever you find, the data will be more convincing if the response rate to your survey was a good one. Employee Satisfaction Survey response rates vary wildly. Some employers, particularly in the public sector, routinely struggle to achieve much more than 20% while many of our clients experience response rates in the 70s and 80s and sometimes over 90%.

So what determines the response rate to a survey? Let us consider each of the influences in turn.

### Engagement

Engagement is a measure of the quality of the relationship between employer and employee. Put briefly, employees who are engaged with their employer feel that they are in a cooperative, respectful, mutually beneficial relationship with an employer whose objectives they understand and endorse. Many Employee Surveys measure engagement because there is good evidence that improved engagement leads to improved performance; both individual and corporate.

Engagement also seems to correlate with response rate to a survey, so low response often indicates a low level of engagement. As you improve engagement, survey response rate will probably improve too.

### Involvement

If some employees are involved in the development of the questionnaire, they will not only provide the employee angle on issues which might otherwise be researched only from the management point of view, but they will also become ambassadors for the survey itself, encouraging colleagues to take part in what is to some degree their baby.

### Relevance

The questionnaire should cover areas that employees are interested in, and not omit the one thing people are most worked up about.

If you know you can't do anything about that thing just now, don't ignore it. In the pre-publicity materials (see Expectation below) acknowledge the issue, explain that you can't change it at the moment, and why, and that consequently it isn't included in the questionnaire.

## Experience

Perhaps there have been previous surveys. If so, do employees perceive that anything changed as a result? Do they know what the main findings of the survey were?

An employee who knows that the results of the previous survey led to some change, or an effort to change something, even if the change didn't represent an improvement for them personally, probably feels as if there is some point in completing another questionnaire now. On the other hand, if they never heard anything more about the last survey, and are not aware that anybody took a scrap of notice of it, they'll question the point of providing any further input to be fed into the same black hole where their previous responses seem to have vanished.

## Expectation

When the survey mailing arrives, whether it comes in paper form or as an email, people will be more likely to respond if they were expecting it; if they now recognise that something they had been told to expect has actually happened. A paper mailing which wasn't expected might not get much attention and might therefore be rapidly consigned to the bin. If the survey mailing is an email, the recipient will usually make a decision to retain or to delete it based only on the content of the subject line. If those few words refer to something which had been expected, there is a good prospect that the email will be opened. An email which comes out of the blue might not be recognised as being important at all, and is in great danger of being deleted.

### Use web and paper?

Allow people to choose the medium they prefer, and get publicity and some buy-in in advance.

- Mail everybody, explaining about the proposed survey and inviting them to nominate their preferred medium for completing it.
- Record the responses in your mailing data file, designating each informant as a web or paper participant.
- Designate those who don't respond by using an appropriate rule.
- Mail paper questionnaires or email invitations according to people's preference.

People will hear about the survey beforehand and are more likely to respond to the survey if they have told you they want to complete it one way rather than another. We handle the administration for our clients when that is more convenient for them.

This means that there should have been some prior publicity giving warning that the survey was to happen, promising anonymity, promising action on the findings and expressing the commitment of the senior team to these promises. If a previous survey has led to changes people will recognise, remind people about that. You may also give some details of the methodology to be used, the timing of the survey and the schedule for publication of a results summary.

## Methodology

Most Employee Satisfaction Surveys use a self-completion questionnaire, and a census approach; meaning that every employee is invited to participate. Many surveys are now handled via the web but depending on the nature of the organisation, paper

questionnaires are still used when appropriate. The choice of methodology can influence response rate but there is no rule which says that one approach will always be better than another. What suits

one organisation or one person might not suit another. Knowing this, you may wish to offer each target informant the choice of media; see Use web **and** paper?

### **Convenience**

Make it as easy as possible for the informant to respond. If you are using paper questionnaires, provide a postage paid reply envelope so that all they have to do is fold it up, pop it in the envelope and drop it in a pillar box. Leaving people to search around for an envelope, write the address and then find a stamp will reduce the response.

On the web, give access through a single click. A login and password makes life too complicated for many people, and they just won't bother.

### **Anonymity / Confidentiality**

Some of the questions in your questionnaire will probably be about issues where unfavourable responses will reflect badly on a particular individual, usually the informant's immediate manager.

You can learn about this sort of thing by conducting an anonymous survey, in a way you couldn't by encouraging managers to talk to their people. People don't want to get into a confrontation so they won't tell their manager the truth to their face and even in a survey they won't answer such questions honestly if they think their manager might find out how they responded. So it makes sense to give credible assurances of anonymity.

Much of the value that you will get from the survey results will come from the opportunity to compare between groups of informants defined by department, sex, age group, job type etc. etc. To make such comparisons, you must include these classification questions in the questionnaire, and you will probably want several of them. Many informants will realise that their pattern of responses to the various classification items is unique, so that anyone who knows the organisation well enough would be able to recognise this response as theirs.

This puts the credibility of your promise of anonymity to the extreme test. An informant who intends to be critical and who does not wish to be hauled into the manager's office to justify their answers will complete the survey only if they trust that promise. The best way to ensure this is to use an external supplier to receive and summarise the responses.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire should not appear to represent a huge chore. An overlarge questionnaire will discourage responses. So keep the length of the questions to the minimum. This will also help to reduce the potential for ambiguity. Keep instructions to a minimum too. Many people won't read them anyway, so the design should make it obvious how people are to respond. Don't include yards of white space. It may be very elegant in design, but if the result is 32 pages where 4 would have

#### **Email invitations and Spam detectors**

Email inviting people to participate in a survey is especially vulnerable to being filtered by over-zealous spam detectors. It may come from a source which is not among the recipient's previous correspondents. It will probably bear the hallmarks of a bulk mailing. The subject line may resemble the sort of subject line spammers use in an effort to grab people's attention.

Even if the message reaches the intended inbox, it may be in an inappropriate format. Sending HTML email to recipients whose email application can only read plain text will produce unpredictable results, usually unsatisfactory. So it makes sense to pilot the mailing to check before the event that emails are going to reach their intended destination with text, images and any links intact.

done, some people will perceive it as a time-consuming document and won't even open it to find out that there are only two questions on a page.

Keep the questions and the response frame, the way people reply, simple and straightforward. Complexity will reduce response rate. And put those classification questions at the end. Then, if somebody decides they don't want to answer those, they can leave them blank but as they have already answered all the other questions, they'll probably complete and return the questionnaire. If

these questions had been the first thing they encountered, they might decide not even to begin.

If you are using a web questionnaire, it has special considerations. See the *Web questionnaires* panel.

Finally, even if you provide a reply envelope with a paper questionnaire, remember that some people will lose it, so print a FREEPOST return address on the questionnaire as well.

### Web questionnaires

Even if it contains the same items using the same words, a web questionnaire can be a different questionnaire from its paper "equivalent". A crucial difference is that it can't be completed on the train or on the bus – or only by people who are able and willing get a web connection on the train or on the bus, which will not be many.

It may be different in more ways than that, though. You can print *Please complete every item* or *Tick only one* on a paper questionnaire, but people might not take any notice. On the web, you can enforce these rules if you choose to. We wouldn't advise it however, because many people will find it irritating and will abort it rather than jump through the hoops you have set up for them.

Also, on the web, you won't put as many questions on one page as you could on paper. If you did, informants would have to scroll way on down to reach them all; not at all an elegant web solution. So you will have many more virtual page turns, and each one will take longer than it takes to turn a page in a paper document.

In a paper questionnaire, the informant can see and feel how much more there is left to get through. On the web, they can only know if you have taken care to tell them, so to stop them giving up it is important to give some progress indication on every page.

### Contentment

Sometimes an organisation which is clearly well-managed and where other evidence suggests a reasonable level of engagement will produce a surprisingly disappointing response. This seems to arise from a feeling among employees that they are reasonably content with their experience at work and extremely busy. Given that there are so many other pressing calls on their time and no message they urgently wish to convey to management, it makes sense for them to get on with the job rather than spend time completing a questionnaire to say that things are generally ok, thanks.

The only way to get round this is to address it head on. Include in the

advance publicity materials and in the covering message a statement to the effect that the proper interpretation of the results depends on getting responses from as many people as possible, even those who have no complaints. This may encourage some of the contented folks to respond, who otherwise wouldn't.

### Despair

The other mind set which leads to a quick decision not to respond is the one which assumes that the survey is a meaningless gesture toward consultation but nobody will take any notice whatever the results may be. This may arise from a generally autocratic style of management which has conveyed to the underlings that their opinions don't count, or from people's previous experience of surveys

which have led to no change. In either case, it is hard to convince them that anything will be different this time round.

It is tempting to advise you not to start from here, but if this is where you are, you have no choice. You may need to start a slow process of restoring trust by conducting a survey, publishing a summary of the results including the poor response rate, and then taking some meaningful action based on what you learn. Publicise the fact that the action was prompted by the survey results, and when you repeat the survey, maybe more people will see some point in participating. You can't buy trust; you have to earn it and as in so many other aspects of management, actions speak louder than words.

### **Incentives**

If you were inviting people to identify themselves, you could offer an incentive for participation; entry into a prize draw, for example. If you take our advice to make all responses anonymous, however, that is clearly incompatible with any kind of individual incentive unless you are very sure that people trust the independent third party you are using. In that case, people could be invited to identify themselves to the third party, on the understanding that their survey responses will be analysed anonymously.

Even if responses are anonymous, you can offer to make a donation to charity. You may set a fixed amount per response, or so much for each department whose response rate exceeds a stated target figure. You could include in the questionnaire an opportunity for informants to vote for the charity they would like the donation to go to, either by including a free text prompt where informants enter the name of their pet charity, or preferably by asking people to choose from a list. The donation can go all to the one most people prefer, or to each in proportion to the number of votes. Don't forget to publicise the results.

### **Urgency**

It is helpful to set a deadline or closing date for responses. If you send a survey invitation and ask for the response by the end of three months from now, few people will do it right now. Most will think they have plenty of time, so it can go in the pending pile from where it might never emerge. On the other hand, ask for responses to be returned by tomorrow and a good many people will see that as such an unreasonably short deadline that they will instantly decide not to participate, and bin or delete it.

Try to set a deadline which represents the happy medium between these two extremes. It should appear urgent enough to encourage many people to deal with it now, on the "handle it only once" principle, but not so short as to lead others to ditch it as unreasonable. We find that in most organisations with paper questionnaires a deadline about a week after the informant first sees the questionnaire works well. For a web survey, a slightly shorter deadline may be appropriate.

In either case, you can follow up before the deadline quite expires, with a reminder extending the deadline.

### **Reminders**

Every reminder you can give will produce a fresh crop of responses. In an anonymous survey, everyone will get a reminder, whether they have already completed the survey or not. This can get a bit irritating by the second or third time and the law of diminishing returns applies, but it is usually worthwhile to issue one or two reminders, and if appropriate, each one can extend the closing date. Give the message that most people have now completed the survey but to allow opportunity for everyone to do so the closing date has been extended. This suggests that anyone who hasn't

completed the survey is out of step with the majority, which should encourage some stragglers to join in.

If you can, provide a fresh copy of the questionnaire with the reminder. A reminder with the questionnaire is more effective at adding responses than one which just asks the employee to find and complete the one they had before. Depending on the methodology and the confidentiality arrangements you have made, it may not be possible to provide another copy of the questionnaire without allowing the same person to provide multiple responses which you won't be able to detect.

### **Coercion**

We encourage you to take up all the foregoing suggestions but here is one which you should not employ.

It is not unheard-of for employers to corral all the employees, in groups if necessary, into a room; dish out questionnaires and ask for them to be completed before people leave. The questionnaires might be collected up and sealed in a big envelope to be sent off for analysis. But employees don't know that the envelope won't be opened as soon as they have left, and their manager allowed to see how they completed the survey.

Even if you were to get a high response rate this way, the responses wouldn't be honest. People should not be obliged to complete an Employee Satisfaction Survey questionnaire. There isn't much value in a survey with a high response rate achieved through such bullying tactics and the practice would damage, rather than improve your relationship with your people.

### **Take responsibility**

Many of the issues we discussed above are clearly connected to the way the organisation conducts itself through the year. Especially important is the employees' perception of the attitude of those at the top, and their openness to calls for change.

These influences are far more powerful than any initiative an external supplier can suggest in the run-up to the survey, or while it is live. A supplier may be able to help a bit but if the response rate is good, most of the credit for that belongs to the client, not the survey supplier. And if it isn't good, it follows where most of the blame lies for that.

**A version of this article has appeared in the following journal**

[Human Resource Management International Digest](#)

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

[Your Employee Satisfaction Survey](#)

[Why run an Employee Satisfaction Survey](#)

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

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

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