

How to get higher response rates for your employee satisfaction survey?

or

Why don't employees respond to an employee satisfaction survey?

Response rates when conducting an employee survey are notoriously variable-anything from 20% up to 95% is possible. So why do employees sometimes respond to surveys and other times don't? -And more importantly what can be done to achieve a response rate high enough to give you confidence in your own survey results.

5 good reasons not to take part in an employee survey

Reason 1 - This survey is a waste of time-it's not important

Many organisations' employee surveys are doomed to fail right from the offset. Often there has been lots of high profile communication about the forthcoming employee survey (usually accompanied with the slogan "Your Views Matter"), explaining how the organisation is about to survey its employees, as part of its ongoing commitment to continuous business improvement, and as part of its programme to achieve Business Excellence and/or the Balance Scorecard Approach. As one employee recently said so poignantly to me "I thought the reason for doing an employee survey was to improve the business by improving employee satisfaction."

Here in lies the first problem. Most people, and certainly the majority of your employees believe that your business would perform better with more satisfied employees-the quoted phrase is "your employees will treat your customers the way you treat your employees."

So why do we confuse the message we are giving for carrying out the survey. The message is a simple one. We are carrying out the survey because we believe the business will perform better with more satisfied employees. (If you don't believe this you shouldn't be surveying employees nor going for Business Excellence etc). If asked you can explain how one way of Business Improvement is adopting the Business Excellence Model, which include Measuring Employee Satisfaction amongst other things.

Reason 2 - The results of the survey won't change anything

In a recent survey we carried out for a Client, 92% of respondents believed "the survey was a good way of telling Management what you think." However more startling was that only 22% believed that "the results of this survey will change anything".

This view is usually quite common in organisations that have carried out surveys before and not actioned the results. (The most common reason for this is a weak

survey process which did not produce defined useable outcomes rather than the over – emphasised and over used ‘lack of management commitment’ reason).

The only way to address this is through LINKAGE-good, strong, highly visible linkage. Every action/improvement in the next 12 months should be preceded by the words. “You said in the employee survey this, therefore we have done this. You said in the employee survey that, therefore we have done that.”

This is singly the best way of increasing future response rates. Employees have got to be convinced that their views, in the form of the survey, will lead to real change. Once this link has been established in employees’ minds getting high response rates will no longer be a problem.

Reason 3 – The questionnaire did not ask the right questions

Who decided what questions went in the questionnaire?

The most effective type of employee survey is an *Employee Satisfaction Survey*.

Unlike other types of employee opinion surveys, an *Employee Satisfaction Survey* is designed to establish how well an employer is performing in those areas that matter most to its employees.

Therefore the first stage of an employee satisfaction survey is to consult a representative group of employees about what is important to them. This is usually done in the format of discussion/focus groups. The outputs from this exploratory stage will be used to determine the requirements, and therefore the questions, to be included in the questionnaire. It is likely that this process will highlight many of the requirements that management would like to see in the questionnaire but it always (yes always) identifies employee requirements that managers had not previously considered.

The benefits of involving employees in this first stage of the survey process include:

- Boosting the credibility of the exercise in the eyes of employees.
- Demonstrating that management is prepared to listen to employees’ views.
- Increasing the response rate for the main survey since employees are more likely to complete the questionnaire if it asks about requirements they see as relevant.

The purpose of this exploratory research is to ensure that the main survey asks the right questions. By running focus groups with employees, the employees themselves can explain which issues are most important to them in their relationship with their employer. This will improve the validity of the main survey questionnaire since evidence shows that managers often do not have a very accurate view of employees’ priorities. Logically, if you wish to measure employee satisfaction you should allow the employees to define the component elements of that satisfaction.

Reason 4 – The questionnaire was difficult to complete

Poorly designed questionnaires are synonymous with low response rates.

The first guideline of questionnaire design is the '10 minute rule'. If a questionnaire takes more than 10 minutes to complete, or indeed, looks like it will take more than 10 minutes to complete, employees will be less likely to fill in the questionnaire.

This is particularly true with self-completion questionnaires sent to employees' homes, where your questionnaire is competing against valuable quality home time. (One guideline when piloting questionnaires is to see if it can be sensibly completed during the Coronation Street commercial break). Questionnaires that take longer to complete than 10 minutes will either not be started, abandoned half way through or (even more dangerously) not be answered in a considered manner.

Using a consistent type of questioning, along with easy to understand questions is a must. Questions should be short and simple, and in words that are familiar to the employee and easy to understand.

Ambiguous questions will frustrate employees, (as well as providing you with meaningless information). For example, how do you answer the question "Do you trust your Manager and Supervisor?" if you do trust one, yet mistrust the other?

Leading questions are a no-no, unless you want inaccurate results, and a balanced rating scale is an essential. We recommend a 10 point numerical scale for two main reasons-

- Numbers will let us do statistical analysis of the results and produce an overall Employee Satisfaction Index. (For many statistical reasons you cannot subsequently convert worded answers into numbers).
- Employees find a 10 point scale easy to complete. The idea of scoring something out of 10 is very familiar to everyone (I am sure this goes back to school days were 7 out of 10 was acceptable, whilst 3 out of 10 was accompanied by the dreaded words of "See me")

Reason 5 – My answers will be traced back to me

There is a paranoia from employees that once they have completed an employee satisfaction questionnaire, which often includes some additional written comments, that employers will try to identify who made that comment/gave those answers. This sometimes explains why classification data (which should always be at the end of a questionnaire) remains unanswered. If for example, I answer that I am male, with this length of service, at this level, in this department, there is only me who meets all those criteria.

This is one of the main reasons that organisations use external research agencies. In this instance reply paid envelopes are provided to allow employees the option of posting questionnaires back in any post-box, if they feel uncomfortable using the internal mail system or an internal contact person.

Classification data does need to be detailed, which is particularly useful for analysing the results of various splits and providing trends from certain groups or subgroups of employees. This information is essential in providing useable and actionable outcomes. Reporting back the results and outcomes need to occur at the lowest level possible since it is at this level that real and noticeable actions will happen.

The guarantees that an external agency can give are-

- That the organisation will never see any of the completed questionnaires-there will no analyse of handwriting styles!!
- The research agency's role is to provide accurate, unbiased results and has nothing to be gained from the results of the survey being either positive or negative.
- Results will not be issued to the organisation of any sub groups of ten employees or less.