

The Future of Engagement: Thought Piece Collection

The future of employee surveys

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In this thought piece, Gary comes to the defence of the employee survey. It has become somewhat fashionable to criticise or even dismiss the employee survey as 'transactional'. This is perhaps because some organisations behave as if the survey is an end in itself. Gary argues that, if used effectively, the survey has a bright future as an essential tool to help organisations understand engagement.

The future of employee surveys

‘Simply doing a survey and publishing the results is not the same as an engagement strategy.’

That is the stark conclusion drawn by David MacLeod and Nita Clarke in their influential 2009 report to Government, *Engaging for Success: enhancing employee performance through employee engagement*. It is also the reason why some businesses and organisations do not get the best value from their employee surveys. But we are seeing signs that this is changing – and that employee surveys have a healthy future ahead of them.

The key importance of surveys is that they allow you to measure many different aspects of employee engagement, broadly divided into three main areas. These are:

- **Blockers to engagement:** Problems faced by employees, such as inadequate IT systems, poor policies and procedures, or excessive workloads.
- **Drivers of engagement:** Motivating factors such as praise and recognition, good relationships with line managers, and opportunities to learn career-enhancing skills.
- **Outcomes of engagement:** Beneficial attitudes such as employees’ pride in their work and organisation, willingness to recommend their employer, and desire to remain with the employer for the foreseeable future.

Currently, many organisations place too much emphasis on external benchmarking, rather than using surveys as tools to meet their specific business needs – good examples include organisations that use benchmarking data as positive ‘PR’ rather than to drive business critical organisational change.

Surveys such as these are transactional instead of transformational because they focus more on *procedure* than on *outcomes* (Wiley, 2012). Church et al (2012) reflect on how this can be potentially damaging in terms of organisational perceptions. Only by focusing on outcomes can any employer integrate employee engagement surveys into their wider engagement strategy, shifting the focus from raw results to action that is aligned with the key business objectives.

When survey results deliver commercial benefits

Let us take an example. Jupiter Hotels not only decided to benchmark levels of engagement within its 1,900 strong workforce, but it also wanted to take a detailed look at the factors that engaged and disengaged its employees. A series of regular snapshot surveys revealed that there was room for improvement in three main areas: employee recognition, communications and training and development.

It was the action Jupiter Hotels quickly took that was important. They revamped staff facilities, invested in IT training and created a new staff uniform. A new Staff Award scheme allowed managers to make on-the-spot £25 cash rewards for outstanding effort, and to put forward individuals for employee of the month (or year) recognition. New training and development featured a ‘Rising Star’ programme to help

talent rise through the ranks, while a new newsletter keeps staff informed about what colleagues have been doing. Employees now qualify for major discounts off products and services within the Accor group of hotels.

It is this outcomes-based approach to employee engagement that delivers commercial benefits. In the case of Jupiter Hotels, the work 'added great value to our business strategy, and helps us pinpoint areas of development for the organisation and individual hotels.'

A psychological contract with your workforce

Outcomes are also essential for employees taking part in the engagement process, whether it involves surveys, focus groups, gathering feedback from social media or any other technique. By introducing an employee engagement process, employers are essentially entering into a psychological contract with their workforce – the expectation is that action will follow. If this does not happen, there is a very real danger you can unwittingly demotivate large numbers of your staff. Longitudinal studies (Church et al, 2012) have shown that, for every increase in the percentage of respondents reporting that results were shared and actions taken, there was a corresponding increase in survey participation.

A lack of outcomes is set to become a more common problem as organisations turn to new technology to drive their employee engagement processes. Systems that provide 'always on' surveys to collect data in real time are now pitched as a replacement for the traditional engagement survey. The problem is that, while these systems collect lots of data (which can be a nightmare for managers to sift through), you still need to consider how to translate those results into action – the real driver of your employee engagement strategy – or risk the pitfalls of a purely transactional survey.

Many companies simply will not reap benefits by adopting a 'one size fits all' approach. Recently, my company – The Survey Initiative – helped a company with over 16,000 employees in the Asia-Pacific region. Because many of those employees do not have access to computers in their work, the 'always on' survey can only ever gather the views of an unrepresentative section of their workforce.

Using the 'always on' approach in isolation also has significant flaws. Over surveying employees has been cited as a possible root cause of low response rates (Saari, 1998) and this may in turn 'diminish in the eyes of management and employees, the perceived credibility of the obtained data' (Rogelberg et al, 2000). Organisations will find it next to impossible to survey statistically representative samples of their employees – giving extra weight to the opinions of those who fill in the surveys most frequently (or 'shout the loudest'), which may not generalise to the original sample (Rogelberg & Luong, 1998).

The future: Transformational surveys

So what is the future for employee surveys?

In a nutshell, if organisations really want an engaged workforce that delivers major commercial benefits, the traditional employee survey will have a strong future. Flexible, adaptable and manageable, it is a key tool for assessing what blocks and drives engagement – and for demonstrating the impact of employees' attitudes on business outcomes (Saari & Judge, 2004), such as greater profitability, better management, lower employee turnover and improved absence rates.

And if you link survey data with key business metrics in this way, the humble survey may not become your engagement strategy – but it will certainly act as its pulse, giving you powerful insights into the outlook of your workforce and the health of your business.

References

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This paper forms one in a collection of thought pieces by the Engage for Success special interest group on 'The future of employee engagement'. A white paper on the same theme is being published separately. The full collection is available (as will be the white paper) at: www.engageforsuccess.org/futures