

The Future of Engagement: Thought Piece Collection

Social media and employee engagement

Michael Silverman



Michael Silverman is Managing Director of Silverman Research, a company specialising in applying social media principles to social research. A psychologist and research specialist, Michael has a background in research having worked with Ipsos MORI, then moving to Unilever as Head of Employee Insight.

In this thought piece, Michael's focus is on the future use of social media within organisations to facilitate dialogue and enable open conversations. He reflects on crowd-sourced responses from business leaders and professionals to the question, 'How will employee research change over the next 15 years?' and gives insight into how major technological advances are taking hold and shaping research into employee views.

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The Future of Employee Research

The field of employee research is shifting from giving feedback behind closed doors to providing feedback in an open forum. This crucial development is making organisations slowly acknowledge that static feedback mechanisms controlled by management are no longer in keeping with an increasingly social media savvy workforce. Developments in social and digital technologies are at the forefront of this, and while the widespread use of innovative technologies is prevalent in individual's personal lives, their uptake inside organisations is only really now on the turn. These developments are offering some truly pioneering ease of enhancing collaboration and generating feedback. Capturing people's interactions through social technology and applying the latest text analytics offers a new and rich source of insight.

Developments in social technologies, increased frustration with traditional survey methods and a general movement towards mass transparency reflect society's growing preferences in the digital age. People are connected to the things they care about more than ever before due to the power of the Internet. It has enabled the instant sharing of ideas, information and opinions across the globe. Given the relatively static nature of surveys, both the needs of organisations and employees for a real-time alternative are not being met. Social technologies allow the 'wisdom of the crowd' to be harnessed as it encourages multidirectional conversation between people and crowdsourcing of solutions. The mass-adoption of mobile computing goes hand in hand with such developments, ensuring we are always connected to our favourite online services. Lastly, we cannot ignore the power of data. Data is now being collected from all kinds of sources and if appropriately managed it can reveal deep insights into what employees think, feel and do.

How will employee research change in the next 15 years?

In light of these changes, Silverman Research conducted a study using a collaborative, online tool to assess how the public view the changing face of employee opinion research – in particular how technology will change and shape the process of collecting employee opinion. Over 250 of the world's leading organisations contributed to the study, responding to the question 'How will employee research change over the next 15 years?' Responses were peer reviewed by participants with respect to levels of agreement and insightfulness. This makes it possible to crowd-source the suggestion that resonated most with the community as to what the future holds for employee research. The top three responses are as follows –

"The difference will be amazing. Today, we create hypotheses and then go collect data. Tomorrow, we'll be doing the inverse. The constant, steady state accumulation of data will enable us to look at the data before we form our questions. That means that we'll be getting answers to questions we didn't know to ask. We will be unthinking a whole bunch of things we assume to be facts."

John Sumser, Editor, HRExaminer.com

"As the demographic of our workforce changes, and access to social media increases employee research will move away from the traditional annual employee survey to more frequent and interactive research. As

people become more confident in using social media their confidence will grow in being open and honest around the way they feedback and comment on their employer..."

Caroline MacDonald, Internal Communications Lead, Hewlett Packard

"Employees' behaviour will be increasingly traceable and measurable as more information about their activity is electronically captured. Organisations will be better at studying these patterns of behaviour - in the same way that consumer behaviour is studied - so rather than asking people questions which are subject to their mood and interpretation, organisations will be using objective metrics."

Roland Burton, Senior Communications Manager, Marks and Spencer

In addition to crowd sourcing the top suggestions to the discussion question, text analysis was carried out on the qualitative data to reveal the key topics that participants were discussing. Categorisation of comments was done using a combination of automated theme detection and manual word categorisation. The top ten categories discussed in reference to the future of employee research are as follows:

1. **Analytics:** A more strategic approach to data and analysis. Using a broader range of data sources (workforce metrics, opinion data, unstructured text, performance data, psychometrics, social networking/relational data, aggregation data) coupled with an increased capability to identify, segment, model and predict meaningful patterns within it.
2. **Surveys:** An evolution in the traditional survey methodology – from the typically long, generic, annual questionnaire to more frequent, focused, qualitative, real-time/interactive methods. More sensitive approaches that can capture both meaningful information and more subtle shifts in attitudes/sentiment. Allowing employees to conduct polls themselves and using various question aggregators (ie crowd-sourcing the right questions to ask in the first place).
3. **Social Media:** The widespread adoption of technologies that allow people to connect and interact will increasingly be used to collect and aggregate employee opinion. The increasing use of internal social networks will give rise to a proliferation of unstructured text data and associated text analysis.
4. **Collaboration:** The importance of promoting multi-directional communication and interaction (as opposed to traditional one-way and two-way communication) to establish a more collaborative approach to research that can tap into the collective intelligence of employees.
5. **Real-Time:** Conducting employee research in an ongoing and automated fashion in order to gain real-time/current insights as opposed to focusing on the comparison of single response points often a year or more apart.
6. **Devices:** An enhanced capability to use mobile technology for data collection/delivery and the increased prominence of devices such as wearable technology. This will open up feedback channels to non-office based employees that have often been limited in their ability to participate in research.
7. **Qualitative:** A shift in focus from quantitative data and analysis to hybrid approaches encompassing unstructured text data and advanced text analysis to extract themes, emotion and sentiment. Moving away from the idea that qualitative data is too unwieldy to analyse properly

towards a view that the best way to capture feedback from employees is to ask them for a written or spoken response.

8. Leadership: Senior leaders lacking awareness about advances in collaborative research technologies and being fearful of the potential loss of control that comes with giving employees a say in an open forum. The importance of top-down led changes in research and management playing a crucial role in instigating and leading change.
9. Transparency: An emphasis on the importance of openness and honesty between leadership and employees in order to promote trust and collaboration. A move from giving employees a say behind closed doors to giving employees a say in an open forum.
10. Action: Conducting research that produces tangible solutions as opposed to just diagnosing general problems. Committing to an approach wherein employee responses lead to changes in the organisation rather than leaving the employees feeling that they are not being listened to. A move away from primitive engagement targets to targets based on subsequent action.

These themes highlight the huge technological advancements that will be seen in the workplace over the next 15 years - largely the proliferation of digital devices, such as smart phones, tablets, smart watches and other wearable technology which not only facilitate the collection of data, but also make it more readily and easily digestible. Advances in digital technologies also align closely with the theme of real-time information. Mobile devices afford increased real-time data capture. Moreover, they also provide a more rapid and engaging means of presenting data and insight.

Many participants also commented on the characteristic lack of action that typically accompanies traditional employee surveys. A clear prediction for the future of employee research is not only the improved identification of problem areas, but also a greater focus on the formulation of solutions and actions. The output of traditional employee surveys can often struggle in this area. It is difficult to action plan off the back of largely numeric reports that contain unclear conclusions. In this way, the creation of tangible and actionable outcomes for all levels of the organisation was a recurring theme in this research: employee research in the future will be more about curing problems than purely identifying symptoms. An additional aspect to consider regarding actionability is that collecting employee feedback in an open, transparent and collaborative environment has enormous potential for participants to actually learn and share information during data collection. This can increase employees' readiness for change in that they are more aware of the issues at hand and are more likely to feel that their voices have been heard.

Conclusion

The main message to emerge from the study is that the field of employee research is likely to advance exponentially in the coming years. The interaction between enhanced functional specialisms, increasing technological capability and changing societal norms is fuelling fresh approaches to generating insight. We know that the materialisation of employee research as a discipline, of course, far predates the digital age. As a consequence, it would appear that organisations are stuck in pre-digital era thinking with regards to getting feedback from their people.

The problem is that the field of employee research is wide, yet the vast majority of it is comprised of surveys. Apart from transitioning to the Internet and some advances in analytical capabilities, the basic model of employee surveys has broadly stayed the same since its inception. Surveys can have various modifications and have seen limited developments in recent years. However, the study reveals that until surveys become more conversational with aggregation devolved to participants, until they are mixed with relational data – they are limited. This is the case no matter how frequently data is collected.

As previously mentioned, the relentless advance of social and digital technologies means that the evolution of employee research is progressing rapidly. The study highlights that the greatest difference is the shifting patterns of communication that social technologies have caused – from one-way and two-way, to multi-directional communication. Consequently, this is moving employee research on from giving employees a say behind closed doors to giving them a say in an open forum.

Within organisations, openness and transparency will be the vital business characteristics that will make all the difference in the coming years. However, for many leaders, this appears not to have sunk in yet. It seems that many leaders are yet to be convinced of the potential value that an authentic employee voice, through social media, can deliver. This is because the perils associated with an open approach and the benefits of more traditional closed systems, are often overestimated. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that whilst these changes may not yet be reality, they certainly are the forefront of practitioners' minds.

The full report and findings into the Future of Employee Research can be accessed here www.hrmagazine.co.uk/digital_assets/The_Future_of_Employee_Research_Report.pdf

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