

[155-210] Taking the temperature

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Employee surveys: a business improvement tool or an addictive process?

In today's difficult economic climate, accessing the budget to conduct an employee survey can be a challenging task. In lean times human resources (HR) initiatives are often the first to be axed, yet employee engagement surveys and cultural assessments are an important diagnostic tool that HR managers and the executive group can utilise to identify:

- employee engagement issues
- ways to increase productivity and performance
- opportunities for increased service delivery
- organisational strengths and high performing teams, as well as
- opportunities for improvement.

Neal Knight-Turvey is the General Manager & Research Director at JRA Australia. He says that an organisation will generally undertake a survey for one of the following reasons:

1. **Seasonal conditioning** — the organisation does it every year and has always done it that way.
2. **Substance addiction** — the organisation gets to benchmark its results against others and feel good.
3. **Preventative maintenance** — as a reactive approach to addressing perceived issues within the organisation.
4. **Its own performance improvement** — the survey is used as a diagnostic tool to address customer issues, service delivery, etc. Organisations that gain the most from the process are using all the information to identify areas where performance improvement can be achieved and productivity enhanced.

Knight-Turvey indicates that, in his experience, the businesses which gain the most benefit from their surveys are the ones with a clear purpose and goal in mind before they start out. These organisations are involved in the whole process. They make sure that staff understand the rationale for the survey and what will happen after the results are delivered.

Knight-Turvey says: "there are some HR Practitioners and Managers who believe it is simply a matter of writing down some questions and getting people to answer them. However, to get the most value from employee surveys, it must be understood that survey design and the structuring of questions is both a skilful art and a science." Of course, a common mistake is to devolve all responsibility to an external survey provider, expecting that there is little or no need to be involved in the set up, design and conduct of the survey. This approach can lead to missed opportunities as employees have the best understanding of what key issues within the organisation have a potential impact on business performance and should be assessed in the survey. Similarly, employees have the best insight into the type of language that would be most suited to their workforce. While a survey expert can help develop psychometrically sound survey instruments, they should be working in a collaborative relationship with HR practitioners and managers.

Geoff Alford's chapter titled "Employee Climate Surveys" in CCH's *Australian Master Human Resources Guide* suggests that the successful implementation of an employee survey depends on having a well thought out, systematic process. The survey must be recognised as an important management tool for change within the organisation. Surveys are a means to an end, not a "goal". This implies follow-up action, aimed at change and improvement. Alford also recommends gaining management support for the survey early in the planning stages. Their commitment to taking action based on the survey findings is crucial.

Planning post-survey “action activities” at the outset (ie feedback of results, presentations to management and business units, local team discussions — focusing at each level on “implications for us and initiatives which we can undertake”) is critical to obtaining a return on investment in the survey process. Being ready to move on action items once the survey has been completed is also very important because delays lead to loss of interest.

Allens Arthur Robinson — a leading first tier international law firm — is an example of an organisation which has gained maximum benefit from the information gathered from their two employee engagement surveys — conducted over the last two years.

Susan Ferrier (Director, People and Development) says: “When Michael Rose became Managing Partner last year, we were facing several significant competitive pressures: retention of our lawyers was a critical business issue and the Australian and global legal sector had changed a lot in recent years; internationally and locally here in Australia, law firms had become increasingly competitive with each other; and our clients were expecting more from us in terms of client relationship management”. She indicated that the firm needed to:

- measure employee alignment and engagement initiatives with the new strategic plan in mind (that was being developed and implemented by the new leadership team)
- create a baseline against which they could measure the impact of all of their planned strategic initiatives under the new plan
- understand what motivated their people
- position and benchmark themselves against leading Australian and global organisations, and most importantly
- understand the culture at a deeper level and find those areas of the firm which:
 - were strong and doing well and replicate this success elsewhere and, or
 - needed more attention.

A critical component in the planning and conduct of the survey was the communication, and “branding” of the total process. This was done in conjunction with the corporate communication and internal and external marketing team specialists who developed the “My View” brand. They didn’t use gimmicks or rewards to obtain their 77% response rate, rather they focused on encouraging staff to “tell us what you think” emphasising that the survey was a way for staff to have their voices heard through both a statistical survey and focus groups that would collect qualitative information. They used emails, posters and videos as their key communication tools. After the first survey they conducted 46 focus groups. This will be reduced for the current survey and a new format adopted to collect different data.

Allens Arthur Robinson avoided the mistakes of many organisations who do not undertake sufficient data analysis. Ferrier insists that employee engagement is a “management science” and that data collected through the survey process needs to be subjected to intensive analysis to ensure that each department and/or practice group have useful and meaningful data that can be integrated into their business plans and translated into items for action.

The points raised earlier by Knight-Turvey and Alford are confirmed by Ferrier who says: “to be successful there needs to be leadership buy in from the CEO and the Executive team, they need to understand and own not only the concept of employee engagement but also be willing to act on the data collected through the survey process.”

Allens Arthur Robinson has used the data from both surveys, and their subsequent implementation plans, to link engagement with the firm’s business strategy and then to cascade engagement initiatives through the organisation via departmental business plans. At the macro level, there are engagement metrics in the strategic plan and then in each departmental business plan. Practice group leaders are accountable for delivering to specific engagement targets which have been developed using the data from their groups.

There have been some very positive outcomes from the process with the overall engagement score increasing by 4% to 81% within 12 months. This improvement in engagement is an extraordinary result as

normally an increase of about 1–2% in the first year can be expected. In addition, responses to the question, “The firm’s approach to remuneration motivates me to perform well” moved up 16 percentage points. For the question — “I think my immediate partner/manager is committed to the performance review process” — there was an increase of 10% in favourable responses. On the question — “I know how my remuneration package is determined” — there was an increase of 15% in favourable responses.

One of the outcomes from this past year’s survey has been to set up a project on flexibility and diversity. Ferrier has hired dedicated technical specialists to support the approach to flexibility and diversity and this team has built an online resource centre on their intranet and branded “Life & Work” (again, they worked with their branding consultant advisers to come up with this idea). Life & Work contains a range of tools to support flexibility and wellbeing including:

- flexible leave policies
- information on the flexible working arrangements
- managing the transition to parental leave and eldercare, and
- demonstrations of flexibility in action throughout the firm.

While such policies and programs might have been delivered anyway, Ferrier believes that the information gleaned from the two surveys has significantly contributed to the focus of the policies and programs in responding to staff needs. Action plans are focused on areas where there will be the greatest return on investment and greatest opportunity to increase staff people engagement.

Finally, Ferrier says: “don’t underestimate how powerful this stuff can be and don’t underestimate how much it will engage the leadership team ... the material engages them as individuals and as a group ... it really ignites people. Never underestimate the time it takes to manage — but it’s worth it! There will be people also you will want to have brought in and they might be difficult. Be resilient.”

Clearly taking the time to consult, communicate, thoroughly analyse the data before taking action has some real benefits for organisations. The following hints were collated as a result of the research for this article and the author’s own experience.

Hints for facilitating successful surveys

1. Ensure you have CEO and executive support.
2. Communicate with the CEO, managers and all staff. Ensure everyone knows the purpose of the survey, and what will take place after the data is delivered.
3. Use someone who has skills and expertise in writing questions and survey design. Often questions can be poorly crafted and do not deliver the right information that is needed.
4. Pay attention to “garbage in = garbage out”. Technical design and validation of questions is very important.
5. Consult with all stakeholders about the deliverables of the survey.
6. Be clear about what you are trying to achieve.
7. Don’t just “eyeball” the data — analyse it and ensure it is presented in a way that the internal clients can use it within their work teams.
8. Provide feedback to all staff and have the CEO communicate the results, action plan, and his/her reaction to the results.
9. Prioritise any interventions and ensure that these link to business measures.
10. Remember that the best action plans may not work if they are not institutionalised. People need to be held accountable for their actions and monitored and measured on a regular basis.