

UNDERTAKING EMPLOYEE ATTITUDE SURVEYS.

Checklist 078

» INTRODUCTION

Employee attitude surveys are used by organisations to explore employees' views and opinions, to get feedback on the impact of a new strategy or policy, for example, and to monitor levels of morale and satisfaction across the organisation. They enable employers to take account of employees' views in the planning process, respond to issues of concern and make changes that will be beneficial to both the organisation and those who work within it.

When used effectively, employee attitude surveys can make a significant contribution to the overall success and performance of the organisation. In many organisations this is not the norm, however. Employee surveys are often infrequent, inflexible and ineffective. They may rely on a rigid set of standard questions and there may be a reluctance to update the content or approach of the survey to include questions on issues which are current and relevant to a particular organisation at a particular time. In addition, many employees are convinced that the results of surveys will not be acted on, leading to a low level of engagement.

Well planned and implemented employee attitude surveys have many benefits, such as:

- › increasing managers' awareness and understanding of employees' opinions, feelings and perceptions
- › providing information to support problem-solving, planning and decision-making
- › building relationships of trust by sharing knowledge
- › engaging employees, improving morale and motivation and retaining talent
- › providing an effective communication channel or sounding board.

» DEFINITION

An employee attitude survey is a systematic investigation of the views and opinions of those employed by an organisation on issues relating to the work of the organisation and/or their role within it. Employee attitude surveys may be conducted by means of questionnaires or interviews; they may be undertaken occasionally for specific purposes or at regular intervals, and may be used to make a general assessment of employee morale or focus on a specific issue such as the introduction of a new policy.

» ACTION CHECKLIST

1. Define the scope and coverage of the survey

Identify the subject on which employees' opinions are to be gathered and define this as precisely as you can. Decide who is to be included in the survey - all employees, one department, a single site, or a group of employees. Bear in mind that carrying out, evaluating and acting on the results of an employee attitude survey will require time and resources and be clear about how you will deal with people's views once they have been given.

2. Decide who is to run the survey

It is worth giving careful consideration to this as questionnaire design and data analysis are areas which require specialist knowledge and expertise. The survey could be run by your personnel or HR department, if you have one that is large enough, or by a special working party drawn from all levels in the organisation. You might also consider contracting the work out to an external consultant, if you feel you lack the necessary expertise internally; this will cost more, but it may help to convince staff that the process will be undertaken in a professional and impartial manner, that anonymity will be preserved, and that the results will be taken seriously.

3. Select a survey method

Two principle survey methods are available:

- › questionnaires to be filled in by individual employees - these are particularly useful when numbers are large and enable employees to express their views anonymously. The quantitative information produced can easily be compared over time.
- › interviews with employees - these can be carried out either with individuals or with small focus groups. The interactivity involved makes it possible to explore attitudes and feelings more deeply. The process is time-consuming, however, and can be impractical with large numbers. It is also more likely to produce inconsistencies, and the final results will be harder to quantify.

Decide what balance can and should be struck between the quality and usefulness of the data collected and the practicality of carrying out the research. Consider the numbers to be surveyed, the type of information needed and the resources available. Nowadays, most questionnaires are carried out online using specialised survey software which gathers and analyses the results automatically. If you are using software to conduct your survey or analyse survey results, do some research on the different programmes available and the facilities they offer before designing your questionnaire or deciding on your interview approach.

4. Determine the questions and procedures

Both the questions and the accompanying guidelines should be carefully formulated to ensure that the meaning is crystal clear and to avoid any ambiguity or any confusion about how to respond to the questions. Consider involving employees in co-creating both the questions and the methodology. Remember that seemingly simple questions can hold many pitfalls for those new to devising questionnaires or survey interviews. Find out more about the process, or take professional advice, before finalising questions and procedures. Our related checklist on designing questionnaires (See Additional Resources below) includes guidance on composing questions and the use of rating scales, such as the Likert scale. Take account of any potential problems with literacy or understanding of the terminology used in the questions.

Further points to consider include:

- › How will employees access the questionnaire and how long will it take to complete?
- › Do the questions cover all aspects of the subject on which you need feedback?
- › Are all of the questions relevant and useful, rather than just interesting?
- › Do any questions discriminate against any group?
- › Will the information obtained be easy to analyse?

- › Is confidentiality assured?
- › Do you want to standardise some questions, so that useful trend data can be gathered year-on-year?
- › Will it be helpful to ask individuals whether they would be prepared to answer follow-up questions in more detail? Bear in mind though, that this means they will need to identify themselves at the end of the survey.

5. Pilot the survey

Piloting the survey is vital as it will enable you to check that respondents can follow the procedures and interpret the questions correctly. Select a number of employees and ask them to complete a questionnaire or undertake an interview. Afterwards, ask them whether they had any particular problems. Check whether the information gathered is what was expected and needed. If necessary, make modifications to the questionnaire, or provide extra training for the interviewers.

6 Explain the exercise to all employees

It is crucial to ensure that people understand your reasons for carrying out the survey and appreciate the benefits it may have. Think carefully about how you present the survey and what it is called. A survey entitled 'Introducing Teleworking', for example, may give rise to all kinds of anxieties or expectations. With due care and attention it should be possible to alleviate potential fears and obtain a high response rate. Reassure employees that there is no 'hidden agenda' involved. Depending on the nature of the survey, you may also wish to explain why you are doing it to those not participating, to avoid generating misleading rumours and speculation.

7. Carry out the survey

Send out the questionnaires or arrange the interviews and, to avoid loss of impetus, set as short a deadline as possible for completion. Remember, though, to allow sufficient time for any employees who are on leave to complete the survey, and to ensure that help is on hand to deal with any problems that may arise. Asking respondents to return completed questionnaires to an external agency, will help to convince them that their replies will be dealt with in confidence and with impartiality.

8 Report on the results

It is essential to communicate the results of the survey to both senior managers and employees, if distrust and suspicion are to be avoided. For employees, it is advisable to provide a good summary and make further data and comment available for those wishing to review the findings in more detail. Make sure that the report outlines the original reasons for carrying out the survey and is clear about what was learned and what was not learned from the results. If possible, benchmark the results externally. This is especially important for regular surveys which monitor trends over a number of years. If the survey is very specific, however, it may be impossible to draw comparisons.

9 Act on the results

Failure to do take action based on the results of the survey will undermine the whole process. Ultimately, it will mean that opportunities for improvement have been missed and the resources put into conducting the survey have been wasted. The survey results may have identified concerns that need to be addressed, perceptions which need to be changed or problems that need to be resolved; on the positive side, it may have endorsed plans for the future or provided support for fresh initiatives.

Depending on the nature of the survey and the subjects covered, the results will need to be considered by the senior management team, or by departmental managers. Consultations will need to be carried out and decisions made about what actions are to be taken to address the issues raised in the short, medium or long term, and who will be responsible for making sure that these are actually carried out. It is vital to

ensure that employees are informed about actions planned in response to the results and the expected time scales for action. This will demonstrate that the effort involved in completing the survey was worthwhile and encourage engagement with future surveys. Moreover, it will lead to business improvements and contribute to ongoing employee engagement and satisfaction. Equally, if it is decided that no action can be taken on a particular issue, the reasons for this also need to be clearly communicated, so that employees understand that their views are not being disregarded without good cause.

10. Evaluate the survey method

Evaluate the survey after it is completed, covering, for example, the response rate and any difficulties that arose. Take account of the findings when planning and designing any follow-up, or new survey. Invite feedback from employees who did and who did not take part on their impressions of the whole process.

11. Consider a follow-up survey

Evaluate the survey after it is completed, covering, for example, the response rate and any difficulties that arose. Take account of the findings when planning and designing any follow-up, or new survey. Invite feedback from employees who did and who did not take part on their impressions of the whole process.



POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Managers should avoid:

- › implementing an employee attitude survey without careful planning or initial piloting
- › forgetting to note problems encountered, for future reference
- › forgetting to adapt questions to new situations
- › failing to report the results of the survey
- › failing to take action on the results
- › failing to report on the progress of plans of action.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

Employee engagement and communication research: measurement and strategy action, Susan Walker

London: Kogan Page, 2012

This title is also available as an [ebook](#).

Employee engagement surveys, IDS HR Studies, no 957

London: Incomes Data Services, 2012

What are your employees trying to tell you? Revealing best and worst practice in employee surveys, Peter Hutton

Lulu.com: 2008

Employee opinion questionnaires: 20 ready-to-use surveys that work, Paul M Connolly and

Kathleen Groll Connolly

San Francisco Calif. Pfeiffer, 2005

These books are available for loan to members from the CMI Library. [Click here](#) for more information.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Predicting business unit performance using employee surveys: monitoring HRM-related changes,

Karina Van De Voorde, Jaap Paauwe and Marc Van Veldhoven,
Human Resource Management Journal, 2010, vol 20 no 1, pp 44-63

Are you training in the right skills? Peter Hutton,

Training Journal, December 2011, pp 25-28

The big ask, Lucie Carrington

People Management, 12 Feb 2009, vol 15 no 4, pp 26, 28-29

And the survey says, Kate Hilpern

Personnel Today, 20 Mar 2007, pp 26-28

The employee survey: more than asking questions, Paul M Sanchez

Journal of Business Strategy, vol 28, no 2, 2007, pp 48-56

This is a selection of journal articles available from CMI's library. More information at:

www.managers.org.uk/library

RELATED CHECKLISTS

080 Designing questionnaires

RELATED MODEL

Likert's four management systems

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NATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MANAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

- › Unit CA1 Identify and evaluate opportunities for innovation and improvement
- › Unit DD1 Develop and sustain productive working relationships with colleagues
- › Unit EC5 Use information to take effective decisions

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MORE INFORMATION

e enquiries@managers.org.uk

t +44 (01536) 204222

w <http://www.managers.org.uk>

p Chartered Management Institute
Management House, Cottingham Rd, Corby, Northants, NN17 1TT

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