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The evolution of employee surveys

The pandemic has been a “pivotal moment” in employee research, according to Vijay Mistry, senior consultant at People Insight, an engagement consultancy. With employees facing unprecedented levels of change, many organisations realised the value of capturing how they felt, listening to their concerns and acting on their responses. Organisations that had previously relied on a single, annual survey to produce an index of employee engagement began running regular ‘pulse’ questionnaires on topics from mental health to laptop provision. “The value of employee surveys is shifting; leaders see that they can revise questions as needs change. It’s forced agility into listening strategies and we’ll continue to see this grow over the next few years,” he predicts.

Pre-pandemic, employee listening strategies had been evolving, but at a far slower pace. Annual surveys had long been the staple measure for organisations to benchmark employees’ feelings on a range of aspects of their work life, with some offering the option to place a figure on satisfaction levels: a reduction in engagement would then prompt an investigation into why. But one of the criticisms levelled at annual surveys is that their sheer size makes it difficult to respond to the results in a timely way. “There’s a big build-up and the survey itself is a lengthy process, then by the time you’ve been through the output, analysed the results and pushed that out, most companies have moved on,” says David Godden, vice president of sales and marketing at Thymometrics. “It’s a very employer-centric way of doing things.”

The advantage of adopting a more agile approach to surveying employees is the speed with which organisations can take action. According to Gallup, disengaged employees have 37% higher absenteeism and 18% lower productivity – costing employers the equivalent of about 34% of their salary[1]. Fewer questions focusing on specific areas, asked on a more regular basis, can give a real-time (or near-enough) picture of heat spots where employees might be having trouble. Interventions can happen more quickly rather than problems being left to grow into something far more unmanageable. “Organisations with highly engaged teams achieve better business outcomes, including higher customer satisfaction, retention, productivity, and profitability – all of which are essential in executing successful growth or transformation strategies,” says Patrick Couroyner, chief evangelist at employee engagement company Peakon. The company’s research has found that a one-point increase in engagement score correlates with a 4% increase in customer satisfaction. “Business leaders are eager to know when engagement dips, and understand why, and when it spikes, so they can understand what worked,” he adds.

Some examples of focus areas could be diversity and inclusion, views on a new product release or which benefits are the most useful for remote workers. As employees return to the office post-pandemic, short surveys will give managers an idea of working preferences, concerns about safety, and what the organisation can do differently to sustain engagement. Peakon has recently released a new tool that helps organisations measure their approach to diversity and inclusion, for example. Employees can submit their demographic data anonymously and in compliance with data protection regulations, and managers can analyse employee feedback split by population to identify any issues affecting particular groups, as well as flagging up any incidences of misconduct. “By accurately tracking meaningful metrics and acting upon issues, businesses can use this to understand the impact of their employee experience and drive better business outcomes as a result,” says Couroyner. By mapping survey metrics onto demographic data supplied by employees, or HR system data such as employee turnover and absence, organisations can see issues that need addressing or trends that could impact business in the longer term.

Whatever form an employee survey takes, its value will be limited if managers fail to follow up on the findings. Melissa Paris, lead people scientist for EMEA at Culture Amp, argues in favour of a “continuous listening strategy” across the employee lifecycle – from asking new recruits about their onboarding experience, through to 360-degree feedback for leaders and exit surveys when someone leaves the company. The in-person conversations managers have with employees on the back of the data are even more important than the data itself. “It’s about having a continuous element of improvement,” she says. “Increasing the speed and scale means you can shift your culture much faster. In the hands of managers, the shift in culture can be exponential.” Paris advocates placing data in context in the hands of managers so they can take action relevant to their own teams, but that moves towards a wider goal. “This way it doesn’t feel like a behemoth task, they feel connected as they’re not the only ones dealing with something and they can see where they sit. If they try something and it doesn’t work, they can iterate and move on.”

Greater levels of automation make it much easier to cascade information to managers and to see whether interventions are working. “Before, everything was offline so a manager might be sent a PDF with a suggested framework for action,” explains Mistry. “Now it can be seamless because you can send reports out via email, you can build dashboards and distribute tools they can use to discuss issues with their teams. We’ve developed online action planning tools, for example, so you can select the questions with the highest influence on engagement, log your actions and set start and end dates for interventions.” This level of visibility of how the data is being used creates a virtuous circle of buy-in from managers (who find it easier to act upon and track); employees (who see their feedback being taken on board) and leaders (who get a real-time, helicopter view of how employees feel). Many organisations reported increasing their survey activity during the pandemic as a way to ‘check-in’ on how employees are coping, targeting specific areas such as mental health, views on returning to the office and practical issues around working from home.

The increased use of artificial intelligence in gathering engagement data will mean even greater transparency for employees and managers. “If you make results immediately available to everyone, you can see in real-time what people are saying about the company, and this leads to a conversation,” says Matt Stephens, founder of Inpulse, an engagement analysis tool that focuses on employees’ emotions rather than asking them to ‘rate’ their experience on a scale. Participants are asked to name two emotions, a dominant and a secondary one, and to express why they feel that way. An algorithm reads the responses and places them into one of 22 ‘themes’ which include aspects of working life such as wellbeing or physical environment. The organisation can immediately see if employees feel strongly about something – for example a new payroll system – and investigate for follow-up. Similarly, Thymometrics technology enables companies to offer employees an open (and anonymous) route for feedback at any time, rather than at set points during the year, or when managers decide. “Someone can let off steam and express their feelings anywhere as it’s a simple tool they can use on their mobile,” says Godden. “The always-on approach means we can see trends over time.”

As surveying evolves at pace, thanks largely to the pandemic, we’ll see greater focus on user interfaces and smartphone friendly apps and tools, predicts Mistry from People Insight. “We’ll see more apps being developed, where employees can use their phones to record results and managers can track their dashboards on their phone,” he says. But organisations should not jump into investing in engagement tools because they have an enticing consumer-like interface, cautions Mistry: “We’re seeing tools emerge that use star ratings and emojis, or chatbots that ask questions as they might on a consumer website. They’re a more interesting user experience but at the end of the day it’s still just a survey. If your organisation is just getting used to more frequent listening, it’s not necessarily the right time to add in new methodologies. Once you’ve embedded a programme and culture of listening and action, then you can introduce something different.”

Of all the engagement tools available to organisations, surveys are the most established. Their form is becoming shorter, more regular and more agile, but they continue to provide a valuable benchmark for businesses to gauge the buy-in of their workforce. But whatever the mode or interface, what employees really want to see is how their managers respond to what they tell them. There is a virtuous circle where employees feel comfortable to be honest when asked, where an organisation identifies what it could do better and acts upon it, and the feedback continues. Technology on its own cannot support culture change, but it can be a useful tool to give employees a voice.

TYPES OF SURVEY

Annual surveys are only one gauge of how employees feel about their working lives. As well as a growing number of employee listening tools covered in other chapters, here are some of the most common types of surveys:

- Annual review survey: These often consist of 60-80 questions and can take employees up to half an hour to complete. While a useful benchmark of how employees feel at that point in the year compared with others, the size and scope of these surveys means that analysis and, therefore, any follow-up of the results can be slow

- Company culture survey: This could be a set of questions asking employees how well they feel the organisation's behaviour matches its values. Identifying gaps can help leaders improve strategies for inclusion or change management

- Pulse survey: 'Pulse' can describe a more regular feedback cycle than an annual survey, with many organisations choosing to run these surveys quarterly. They can also be ascribed to particular topics, such as how employees have responded to a new benefits platform or how they think their manager dealt with a change in circumstances. The key feature of a pulse survey is that it is short, making employees more likely to complete it

- Onboarding survey: Improving the candidate experience can lead to lower employee turnover and fewer candidates dropping out of the process, so a short survey after the recruitment process is complete can offer valuable insight

- Exit survey: Many organisations favour an exit interview but a survey can be an anonymous way for employees to give more honest feedback

- 360-degree survey: These individual feedback surveys hold a mirror up to managers and can be used as a basis for leadership development

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Five takeaways

1. The pandemic has heightened the need to listen to employees – think about how you will sustain this in the long term

2. More regular or targeted surveys make it easier to act upon the insights

3. Think about your employee listening lifecycle – are you capturing feedback at all stages?

4. Empower managers by automating feedback mechanisms and developing frameworks for action

5. Communicate your follow-up. Employees want to know how the organisation will act on any problem areas they have highlighted

References

1 How to calculate the cost of employee disengagement, LinkedIn Learning Blog, 2017: https://www.linkedin.com/business/learning/blog/learner-engagement/how-to-calculate-the-cost-of-employee-disengagement