



# A Questionable Exercise

The future of the employee survey



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## Foreword

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"Outside the office, factory or shop floor, the feedback we give is open, honest and in the moment. Yet at work, we experience the reverse."

## Foreword

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This research was sparked by professional curiosity. Having worked in corporate communications for more than 20 years, I've rarely encountered a client – public, private or charitable – that does not conduct a regular employee engagement survey.

While writing the book *From Cascade to Conversation – Unlocking The Collective Wisdom of your Workforce*, I learned more about the origins and eventual dominance of these surveys and gained an insight into the strength of opinion for and against their use.

It is clear the employee engagement survey has changed little since the 1950s.

Why has it reigned supreme for more than six decades?

Is it still the very best way to measure the views, opinions and engagement of a workforce? Or have our imaginations failed us? Have we yet to devise a better way to understand the mindset and motivations of people while at work?

To answer these questions, we conducted qualitative research with the people commissioning and running these surveys.

Despite being busy HR professionals, they were all generous with their time and candid about the strengths and weaknesses of their respective approaches. Our report can be read in a variety of ways. For those looking for best practice in relation to today's standard approach, this will be a useful guide, ensuring your survey does not fall foul of being a 'tick box' exercise in both a literal and figurative sense.

For those wanting to know what's next – how the views and opinions of employees might be monitored and analysed in the future – this report provides a tantalising glimpse of the future.

We complete an examination-style questionnaire once a year or once every two years. Our ticks and crosses are collated behind closed doors, analysed over several weeks – or more likely months – and fed back to us selectively. In our world of social networking and spontaneous public likes, follows and feedback, this approach seems ridiculously antiquated. Perhaps it's not surprising that nearly 50% of employees we asked want to see improvements to the way their views are surveyed.

Why has a faster, open, more action-oriented approach been so slow to take hold? It's too easy to blame the many mainstream survey providers who obviously want to protect a lucrative revenue stream. They would have revolutionised their approach sooner if their clients had demanded it. The fault must lie with those organisations that lack the bravery, imagination or motivation to demand something better.

We hope this report spurs organisations to consider whether the old ways are still the best, given a society that is now sharing its opinions like never before.



Katie Macaulay  
Managing director at AB

## Executive summary

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Few HR and communication professionals speak with passion or enthusiasm about their survey process or provider. Many question the standard approach and a minority are trying something new. Our research shows 50% of those participating in these surveys would like to see improvements to the process.

## Executive summary

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The vast majority of organisations are running an employee engagement survey annually or biennially with the help of an external provider. Typically, these surveys contain around 60 closed questions and achieve an average response rate of 75%. Providers use statistical models, correlating different variables to produce an overall engagement score.

Organisations are using employee engagement surveys to measure rather than manage engagement.

The chief benefit of today's employee engagement survey is its comprehensiveness. This is the only time all employees are surveyed at the same time.

Access to benchmark data is valued – organisations want to see how they compare to others.

For many, timing is a weakness. The gap between the completion of the survey and communicating the results can be weeks, if not months. By then, the business landscape has often changed.

Most organisations have a clear and comprehensive plan for launching the survey. However, less than half described the communication of results or the creation of an action plan with the same detail or emphasis. In short, few organisations are using their surveys to actively instigate change at the corporate centre.

This may explain why, in our survey of employees, only just over a third (36%) can point to changes made as a result of the survey.

Some believe the emphasis on the employee engagement survey is counterproductive. They say it encourages leaders to think engagement equals a survey.

The CEO has a direct impact on how engagement is measured. If he or she shows a keen interest, the result is almost always a more bespoke and sophisticated tool. Yet only a minority of CEOs actively champion engagement.

This chimes with our survey of employees we found 41% do not believe their senior managers value the survey process.

Rather than change the employee engagement survey, organisations are introducing 'pulse checks' alongside them. This is a faster, more flexible and more appealing way of asking, analysing and presenting data on engagement.

Our research suggests we will see new tools for capturing and measuring employee sentiment in real-time, locally. The demand for external benchmark data is likely to decline as more value is placed on bespoke survey solutions. Enlightened leaders will demand actionable data that identifies and predicts factors creating low engagement, productivity or retention issues. The result will be quicker, action-oriented tools that takes the measurement from behind closed doors and makes it more open and transparent.

## Methodology

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This report is based on approximately 25 hours of qualitative research collated during 2015 with HR professionals who commission and run employee engagement surveys. It is supplemented by the views of approximately 100 employees who gave us their personal take on participating in these surveys.

## Methodology

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Our first step was to contact key individuals with experience of commissioning and managing employee engagement surveys. In all, we conducted 25 in-depth interviews with HR and communication professionals from across all sectors, including banking, finance, engineering, law, retail and academia.

Participants were interviewed face-to-face, or by phone, using a detailed questionnaire. Each interview was conducted by two researchers and lasted approximately one hour.

For a 360-degree view on employee engagement surveys, we published an online survey inviting

employees to share their views. Approximately 100 responded from a variety of organisations.

There is a wealth of literature on employee engagement survey techniques. We cannot claim to have reviewed it all, but we did read widely to prepare this report.

Most organisations use off-the-shelf engagement models provided by an external provider. These have the advantage of allowing for external benchmarking. Only a few are undertaking their own qualitative research to determine what drives engagement for their particular workforce. The few that are say this helps identify which low or high scores actually matter in relation to engagement inside their particular organisation.



# Findings

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## 1. Current approaches to the employee engagement survey

### 1.1. How often do you run your survey and what is the format?

Most organisations run an employee engagement survey annually or once every two years. A minority – 12% – run a survey once every three years.

Many interviewees said the gap between surveys is too long and are conducting – or considering – smaller, pulse-style surveys.

“Pulse surveys are becoming much more useful. As people become more familiar with the format they start to really use the data and say: ‘I’ve got a plan, and because of this data I’m going to tweak my plan a bit as the environment around me changes.’”

“We run our surveys every two years but I think there needs to be mini surveys in between. There’s a high turnover in retail and our average length of service for our junior roles is only 1.9 years.”

Most organisations run their surveys online, saying it is easier, faster and more cost effective to collate and analyse online data. Only a few organisations offer a different format of the survey to those employees without direct access to a computer. Unsurprisingly, those who distribute paper copies of their survey see a higher response rate among non-desk-based employees.

“It’s mostly online but some staff have no access to PCs so there’s a paper copy available.”

“One-third of our workforce does not have access to a computer, so we let them log on to their manager’s computer. In one location they took an iPad out to staff and let employees complete on these.”

### 1.2 What are the key stages in the process?

The survey planning and preparation process is usually a collaborative effort. HR teams are working with others from across the business to ensure they are asking the right questions and promoting the survey in the most successful ways.

However, this robust and collaborative process at the beginning tails off once the results are in. Action planning, plus the communication and monitoring of these actions, is not managed with the same combined focus and efficiency.

This is likely to be why many employees told us the priorities of the senior leadership team are wrong. Rather than focusing on what they are saying, many believe leaders’ primary focus is achieving the highest possible response rate.

#### Getting buy-in

The first step for many is to get buy-in from senior leaders in the organisation – not to the process, which is generally accepted as a business-as-usual activity, but to the approach and questions. Interviewees noted that engagement needs to be led from the top and that without this buy-in, the survey is unlikely to be taken seriously by employees. The need for senior level buy-in is a repeated factor throughout the research.

#### Crafting the questions

All interviewees work with an external survey supplier. Most use their supplier’s core set of questions and supplement these with tailored questions pertinent to their organisation. This ensures the most important questions are covered while still giving enough data for an overall engagement score and comparisons.

“Rather than employees just giving their views on an issue, we also need to know how important that issue is to them in relation to their engagement.”

“Deciding what to ask is a joint process between us and the external supplier. We have working groups with reps from across the organisation.”

“There are some questions provided by the external supplier that remain the same each year, so we can see how engagement has changed. The other questions are created by our staff survey project group, which looks at what was asked in previous years and adjusts these questions as needed.”

“It’s a combination of us and our supplier. We know what we want to learn about but our supplier helps to phrase and structure it so we get the answers we need.”

“We determine the four or five open-ended questions and choose the tick-box questions from our supplier’s library.”

Most keep a consistent set of core questions to enable comparisons with previous years and to benchmark against others.

“We tend to use questions from our external supplier as they’re better written and we can benchmark results. We do sit down with them for a long time though to discuss and to change the questions sometimes.”

Some organisations are more collaborative than others when crafting questions. A minority are using employee engagement survey groups, made up of people from across the business, to test the relevance and sense of the questions being asked. Some allow different parts of the business to decide on local questions to ensure that all questions are relevant. One participant noted the survey should not be a “dumping ground for questions that people would like to know the answers to”.

Most organisations use off-the-shelf engagement models provided by their suppliers. These have the advantage of allowing for external benchmarking. Only a few are undertaking their own qualitative research to determine what drives engagement for their particular workforce. The few that do say this helps identify which low or high scores actually matter regarding engagement.

Research consultant Susan Walker agrees. She explains that people may not like their working conditions, but when asked what drives their performance and productivity, working conditions may matter far less than other factors.

“You need the insight to know what factors will give you the greatest impact on engagement, rather than merely focusing on the lowest scoring areas.”

### Demographic information

During our research, the report *Diverse Voices – engaging employees in an increasingly diverse workforce* was published. This was a joint initiative between the IPA, Astar-Fanshawe and Tomorrow’s Company. The research report examines the links between employee engagement and diversity and inclusion. Building on their work, we wanted to understand how far HR professionals are using employee engagement surveys to actively investigate this link.

Although many agreed demographic information is essential to understanding employee engagement, very few are asking detailed demographic questions. One interviewee described asking questions relating to race, disability and sexuality as “brave”. However, they added that, if this data is not gathered, “voices will be lost.”

Many told us this information is sensitive and providing an answer should be optional. One interviewee told us 96% of employees choose to share this type of information, but this comment was rare. Many acknowledged there is more these surveys can and should do to help build a picture of engagement through the lens of diversity and inclusion.

### A communications campaign

Our research found the communications campaign in the lead-up to the survey is vital to maximise response rates and keep employees informed about when to expect the results. Organisations are clearly spending much time and effort on this stage of the process.

"We publicise it with emails, briefings, open sessions, leaflets, etc. We had a survey champion in each area to be a local portal of information."

"Two or three months before the survey we launch posters and promotion, telling people the dates and getting managers on board. Then, there is ongoing promotion until the closing date, or if responses are slow, we may extend it."

"We do a lot of work around preparing people for the survey and explaining why it matters. We use a countdown clock to build anticipation."

### Trialling the survey

A couple of the larger companies we spoke to are trialling the survey with a smaller group of employees before rolling it out nationally, or internationally where appropriate.

### Predictive surveys

In our sample, no organisation is asking leaders or managers to complete a survey to predict the outcome of engagement across their organisation. Although rare, we believe this could be a useful way to assess how well your leadership team understands the current concerns and opinion of the people they lead.

### Analysing and communicating the results

Most organisations have a clear and comprehensive plan for the lead-up and launch of their survey. However, less than half of our interviewees described communication of results or the creation of an action plan with the same detail or emphasis.

### 1.3 Do you need to get buy-in from senior management and, if so, how do you achieve this?

The support and understanding of senior leaders, particularly the CEO, has a direct impact on how engagement is measured. When leaders show a keen interest in engagement, this results in the building of a more bespoke and sophisticated survey process.

"Engagement has to be led from the top. If the senior team didn't get it then I may as well stay at home."

"We have our CEO's complete buy-in."

Many organisations are simply repeating an established process. They told us senior teams are bought in because "every company does it", or "it's a global initiative – we don't have a choice".

For one company, we were told managers care about the survey because the results impact their bonus. This interviewee said it was difficult to determine whether managers are driven by personal financial concerns or a genuine interest in employee engagement.

Many HR professionals are still struggling to get their senior leaders to understand the strategic value of employee engagement, in particular, that it's more than a survey.

"There's a lot of hype about engagement but there's not a lot of understanding about what it means."

That was my first question to senior leaders when I started: 'What do you think we mean by engagement?' They want to know the outcome of engagement on the business and what it looks like. Someone once asked me: 'when will we know when a culture change has happened?' But engagement is more than an action plan. We should focus on an engaged workforce with everything we do. We don't tend to explain that very well.

"At least one senior executive doesn't see the point. From his point of view it throws up opinions but doesn't represent the reality of our problems."

"It's like pushing a rock up a hill with some managers. Some people take negative feedback very personally – it's natural not to want to hear bad things."

One interviewee advised those struggling to get buy-in to “find out what keeps the person you’re talking to awake at night and link that back to engagement.”

#### 1.4 Do you use an external supplier?

All interviewees use an external supplier, if only for some initial consultation. They cited various reasons for this – it makes employees feel more comfortable that confidentiality is being protected; organisations do not have necessary skills in-house; it encourages buy-in from senior executives and allows benchmarking.

However, for pulse surveys, a greater proportion of organisations are managing these in-house skills.

We did not insist organisations name their supplier. Nevertheless, many told us they are using established mainstream players, such as Towers Watson, Hay Group, TNS, Gallup and Aon. Only a few are using smaller agencies taking an alternative approach, such as The Silverman Group and Thymometrics.

#### 1.5 Do you benchmark your results against others? Are these benchmarks helpful?

Most organisations are benchmarking their results against a range of criteria, generally, against their competitors, others in their wider sector, and internally between departments.

However, most question the true value of these external benchmarks, primarily because each organisation – even those in the same sector – is unique.

“Measuring myself against others won’t help me drive the right culture in my organisation.”

“Benchmarking turns the emphasis away from what we can do better to ‘look how great we are’. Engagement should not be a beauty parade!”

One interviewee from a retail organisation made the point that sector benchmarks are largely irrelevant because if they lose staff it’s likely to be to any organisation in the FTSE 250, not necessarily a direct competitor.

For those that have been running employee engagement surveys for a number of years, internal year-on-year benchmarking becomes more important.

“We look at external benchmarks but year-on-year data is more important – it allows us to identify internal trends.”

#### 1.6 Approximately how many questions do you ask? How many of these are open questions?

The number of questions asked in the standard annual survey range from 105 at one extreme to around 40 at the other. The average is around 60 questions. One interviewee mentioned there was a cost factor to consider – the more questions, the more costly the survey becomes.

“We ask a huge number of questions each time. This year it was like Groundhog Day – even I didn’t like filling it in.”

Many commented their survey is probably too long.

Very few ask more than one open question. Indeed, many do not ask one. The reason given is largely the difficulty in analysing written responses, even when using software programs.

“The way technology is heading, analysis of open-ended questions will and should be done by a computer. Analysing data from open questions is a pain in the neck.”

To help analyse open questions, a minority ask respondents to categorise their answers according to pre-determined themes.

A small minority say there is tremendous value in another human being reading people’s comments. As one interviewee said: “There is no shortcut to sitting down and reading the comments that relate to your business.”

Some are concerned that open questions raise very specific issues that cannot be shared more widely because individuals would be identified.

“We really try to encourage people not to be specific in their open responses because a lot of answers can’t be shared.”

A few interviewees are conducting focus groups centrally to delve deeper into employee opinions and analyse reasons for certain trends. However, as we shall see, the majority leave it to individual business areas to act on the results.

### 1.7 What’s the average response rate? Is this steady year-on-year, is it increasing or declining?

Most companies achieve a steady response rate year-on-year. The range is between 40% and 89%, with the average being 75%.

Attitudes towards response rates differed. Many organisations work hard to get their response rate as high as possible. However, for a few the response rate is a reflection of engagement and should not be influenced either way.

### 1.8 Is there a part of your workforce less likely to respond? If so, why?

Two-thirds of interviewees can point to specific areas of their businesses with a lower than average response rate.

Field-based staff (i.e. drivers, sales staff, manual labourers), without access to a computer or perhaps even an email address, are less likely to complete the survey if it means logging on to their personal devices in their free time.

Organisations are trying various ways to combat this problem. Some are sending the questionnaire to employees’ homes, offering paper copies of the survey to complete at work, and giving these employees access to iPads to complete the questionnaire online.

“Previously, we sent letters to everyone’s houses but I think that’s strange... it’s over-personalised. In my old place of work there was a phone number on my pay slip for a short, automated survey. That was the best way of capturing the views of hard-to-reach staff.”

Some interviewees told us the areas of their business with the lowest response rate also have

the least engaging managers. There is much research demonstrating the link between managers and team performance. In 2014, the Harvard Business Review asked its readers about the impact of frontline managers on organisational success. Over 70% of readers believe frontline managers are vitally important in achieving a high level of employee engagement.

“If people don’t complete the survey, it’s usually because their manager doesn’t want them to or because he or she isn’t interested in the results...”

### 1.9 Do you incentivise the survey? If so, how?

Only 15% of respondents are offering an incentive to increase survey participation. Incentives include a donation to charity and entry into a free prize draw.

“Forcing people to complete the survey in that instance is worse than a waste of time; it makes the exercise destructive.”

Organisations that opt for a prize draw say they consider the confidentiality issue, and ensure their employees are aware that entering their personal details into the prize draw does not mean that their answers can be identified.

For those who do not incentivise the completion of their survey, some thought it was a good idea. Others would do if their budgets allowed for the additional spend.

However, some are actively against the idea of incentives.

“The response rate itself is the first measure of engagement.”

Others stressed no incentive should be needed:

“The incentive should be the knowledge that your feedback will be listened to and acted on.”

One participant noted when they stopped offering an incentive, neither the response rate nor the engagement score changed. This suggests for certain types of workforces, an incentive is not an influencing factor.

### 1.10 When commissioning and creating the survey, do you work with other teams and departments? If so, who?

In general, HR leads the survey, but usually works with other departments to shape the questions.

A few organisations have forums or teams of 'engagement champions' from across the business who help create the survey. This input from different parts of the business ensures that the survey uncovers the most pressing issues from all business areas.

However, there is a recognition the ultimate responsibility for engagement does not lie with HR, even though it may manage the survey process.

"There's an old-school way of thinking that HR 'do the people'. I say, 'they're not my team! I'm happy to support managers but it's their job to engage their own teams.'"

Senior leaders are usually involved at some point, whether it is in helping shape the questions from the beginning or just signing them off at the end.

There is a sense that HR has the widest and most objective perspective on engagement.

"If you gave it to anyone else in the company, they'd try to control or influence the process."

### 1.11 Is this the only time all your employees are researched together?

Less than half of all respondents are carrying out 'pulse checks' between the standard employee engagement survey. One of the more innovative approaches we identified was a global engineering organisation using a monthly face-to-face engagement survey alongside a more standard biennial global survey of all employees. Here, a monthly meeting is held at a different site each month. A cross-section of employees is invited based purely on the month in which they were born. Attendees answer a sub-section of 16 questions taken from the main employee engagement survey. These questions are answered using keypads. The results are instant and discussed in the room, with relevant actions agreed and planned. This gives the site and the overall organisation a Positive Climate Index (PCI).

Each element of the PCI is linked to the organisation's strategic plan and is tracked and compared from location to location.

Our research found pulse surveys enable organisations to be more specific with their questions and actions. One interviewee uses these more frequent surveys to understand employees' reaction to specific business events and periods of change. Another uses it to monitor employee reactions to external news events.

Pulse surveys demand a reliable, fast and flexible method of asking, analysing and presenting data. Interviewees told us they were impressed by the attractive and simple online surveys offered by some of the new providers.

Another said she uses Yammer as a way of gathering instant and constant feedback from employees. Although not a survey, having an active online social community makes it "harder to ignore".

## 2. Goals and aspirations

### 2.1 Why do you run employee engagement surveys? Is your current survey fulfilling these needs?

Two-thirds of interviewees say they run these surveys for 'strategic' reasons. They recognise the benefit of having engaged employees and feel the employee engagement survey gives them a robust measure of engagement and helps identify areas of the business where engagement needs to improve.

"We have more than 80,000 people, the majority of whom are very close to the problems of the organisation yet it is difficult to hear their views. It's a very valuable opportunity – a key driver to the things we should be focusing on. It helps us identify the things we should be doing better."

"We link business performance to engagement – it would be madness not to!"

Worryingly, for a few organisations, the survey has no defined purpose.

“Honestly, we have a survey because everyone has one. You have to run one or you’re not doing HR properly.”

“The simple answer would be because we have to, but I know that’s a bit cynical!”

“I don’t really know why we run one.”

A few said the survey gave employees a voice:

“We need to be seen to be listening and acting... You need to take your employees on a journey with you.”

One interviewee gave a passionate plea for the moral case for engagement:

“Beyond anything else, engagement is the right thing to do morally – we employ people, not automatons.”

Most agree their current survey is fulfilling their needs. However, no one we interviewed gave a resounding ‘yes’ to this question, unless they were using a non-mainstream provider.

On a basic level, the standard surveys are meeting expectations – giving metrics that can be compared year-on-year and painting a broad picture of engagement – but the benefit is seen as limited.

It is clear that some HR professionals believe their organisations mistakenly think these surveys actually *drive* engagement, when in fact they are no more than a barometer of engagement.

“I’d like to change the attitude of some senior members of staff. I’d like them to realise that the survey is not the be-all and end-all – it’s just a snapshot. People tend to get survey-fixated but it’s just one part of a much wider engagement process.”

“On its own our survey won’t drive engagement, but we do lots of other things too. It’s part of our wider engagement approach and the only way to hear everyone’s views.”

“We don’t want HR to own engagement. We want it to be line-owned.”

“Awareness and understanding of engagement takes time. Especially in an organisation this size; it doesn’t just happen overnight. You need to understand how engagement impacts performance and customer service. It’s about hardwiring engagement and culture into the DNA of the business.”

Many question the cost of these surveys and are unconvinced they are worth what they are eventually charged.

“It’s a useful tool to prove things, but it’s a very expensive confirmation tool. I’m not sure the cost is worth the time, effort and financial cost.”

## 2.2 Are you confident that the results are an accurate reflection of the mood of your organisation?

Most organisations are confident the results of their surveys are an accurate reflection of the general mood of their workforce.

“I’d hope so. There’s no reason to doubt them.”

“Yes. We have a high response rate so it’s not just the moaners or the positive people that are filling it in – it’s everyone.”

A minority say the results need to be treated with care.

They say external factors can sway the results, so although they may be accurate at the moment of completion, weeks and months later when the data is analysed, the picture may have changed.

“Do I think it’s accurate? No, but it is usable. It gives us a snapshot of engagement at a particular time.”

“Engagement is influenced by internal and external factors. What’s in the media will always effect how you feel about your place of work – when no one likes our industry, people are unsure about working here.”

“Yes, but how people feel changes every day.”

“The survey is done in a specific point in time. The data is only really valid for that moment.”

Interviewees said employees need to feel confident the research is anonymous; otherwise it will not be an honest reflection of their views.

“There’s a nervousness around the confidentiality of online surveys. People are more digitally savvy and they need to know that their answers are secure. It’s all very well saying they’re confidential today, but will they also be confidential tomorrow? We make our surveys optional, and try to make sure people trust us and know the information they provide is anonymous, confidential and secure.”

One interviewee noted their most recent results are the most accurate they have seen because they are no longer linked to managers’ bonuses. They felt managers had been encouraging staff to inflate their scores.

### 3. Reporting and follow-up

#### 3.1 Is the final report useful to you? Please explain why. Does the report come with recommendations or an action plan?

Answers to this question were mixed. The general consensus is that the reports are “reasonably useful”. There is a need to interpret and interrogate the data carefully and an important difference between statistics and insight – the latter being far more useful.

“Interestingly, as engagement has gone up, other metrics have gone down. The more engaged people are, the better service they want to give. So, scores for ‘tools of the job’ have gone down significantly because people want to do their jobs more effectively – and become more frustrated if they can’t.”

#### Layout, presentation and accessibility

Given the amount of data in most final reports, they must be user-friendly. An accessible format, making it easy to navigate and retrieve data, is the most important factor in determining the usefulness of the report.

“The final report is helpful – it’s set out quite clearly and it’s easy to extract data. It’s easy to extract charts and take them to focus groups.”

Most reports are around 60 pages in length. Organisations also receive – or extract – smaller reports focusing on a single business division or location. For reasons of confidentiality, local reports are restricted to a minimum of three to six people. For a minority this causes a problem.

“There needs to be more consideration for differences in size and location. Many of our markets have between 200 to 300 people, so we can cut the data this way. But some have just 11 people. If fewer than three people respond to a particular question that data is wiped.”

One interviewee told us the cost of the overall process escalated because of the number of smaller reports provided by their supplier.

One transport company limited the reports they give managers to two pages. This celebrates the good results and highlights the areas for improvement. In this instance, we were told ‘less is more’.

#### Findings with recommendations

In general, organisations do not expect – or indeed value – recommendations from their survey providers.

“The report comes with recommendations, but we don’t particularly look at them. We tend to do that part ourselves.”



“Our supplier is really good but not at root cause analysis. It’s hard for an external supplier to do that effectively as you need to get very detailed. When they’ve tried, they have often come to the wrong conclusions.”

For some, once the results are in, they embark on qualitative phase of research themselves – using focus groups – to determine the underlying reasons for particularly low scores in certain areas and to explore recommendations and actions.

### 3.2 What follow-up or feedback is given to staff?

Most interviewees recognise the importance of communicating the results effectively to employees and acting on the results. However, both prove challenging for a variety of reasons.

“In terms of feedback and action planning, it’s hard graft, but you have to keep at it. The worst thing is to give up and not take any action.”

Most publish their headline results on the intranet, in their internal magazine, or circulate them by email. One interviewee noted the importance of sharing the results through the same channels as the survey was originally promoted.

Most communicate more detailed results using a cascade system. The responsibility for this tends to reside with managers, who are tasked with communicating the results to their local teams. However, there is no common process for this. A few organisations help managers by producing ‘action planning toolkits’. But many let managers communicate the results in “whatever way they feel is most appropriate”.

Although commonly used, the cascade process is not wholeheartedly endorsed. One interviewee noted managers might (perhaps unintentionally) put their own bias on the results as they get filtered down.

We sensed many HR professionals want to move away from “sitting employees in front of a long PowerPoint presentation”. That said, only a few are creating more visually engaging materials, such as infographics or video animation.

### Language and tone

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of ‘transparency’ when communicating the results. Very few said there is a tendency for the corporate centre to put a particular spin on the results. Instead, the problem seems to be language and tone of the feedback.

Some highlighted the importance of using the appropriate language when giving feedback to employees, which relies on really knowing your audience.

“Everything needs to be clear and simple. People in this business have a million and one other things going on. We use everyday language and present things clearly.”

“The language of the corporate centre is not appropriate out in the business.”

### Two-way feedback

A few emphasised the point that the results should ‘spark a conversation’ rather than a one-sided presentation.

“Line managers mainly use the results to have a conversation with their team.”

For some organisations, giving employees the opportunity to comment on the results forms part of the feedback process. There are various ways this is done. A few have local ‘listening and action’ groups tasked with tackling the causes of poor engagement by identifying and progressing actions ‘on the ground’. But it is clear many HR professionals sitting at the corporate centre are not actively involved in these groups and describe their success as ‘patchy’ at best.

Only a small minority are actively involved in this part of the process.

“I sit down with each department manager to help them share the result with their teams, then ask for more feedback to help get to the root cause of the problems. To aid confidentiality and encourage everyone to speak up, each team nominates a spokesperson who gathers everyone’s comments and emails them to me.”

"The most important follow-up is the conversation. We need to discuss the results and find out what people are really telling us. This part is massively time-consuming and managers need to be genuinely open to hearing feedback. If you miss this stage, the whole exercise is kind of pointless."

### 3.3 Can you point to any specific changes that have been made as a result of feedback from your employee engagement survey?

This is a vital question. We are keen to establish whether these surveys are essentially diagnostic tools for assessing levels of engagement or something more. Do they prompt real change? The lack of a consistent and robust approach to action planning following the survey makes the response to this question unsurprising.

Most respondents could only identify one or two initiatives that were a direct result of survey feedback.

"We had feedback about the state of IT – it was very slow so we rolled out a new IT platform. We knew it was slow beforehand but it gave us an opportunity to say 'you told us, and we listened'."

A significant and worrying minority struggled to name one new development arising from staff feedback. There are two potential reasons for this. Perhaps change initiatives are happening at a local level, under the radar of HR professionals at the corporate centre. More likely, few organisations are using their surveys to instigate change. They are instead using them as barometers of engagement and little more.

"We tend not to use the survey to start something new, but rather evaluate processes that aren't working."

Very few HR professionals said their survey findings are essential to help shape business strategy.

Comments like these were rare:

"We've just completed the strategy for next year and there's a fair chunk of it based on the 2014 survey!"

"We did lots of work on communicating our strategy and the feedback from the survey was a key factor in how it was delivered!"

## 4. The magic wand question

### 4.1 If you could change anything about your current approach, what would it be?

#### The pulse check

The most popular and immediate answer to this question was to make the process more frequent with more regular pulse checks throughout the year. A few said the survey had to stop being a 'process' and become more 'a way of working'. In other words, regularly gauging employee reactions to particular issues should become normal, standard practice.

"People still look at engagement as a survey that is done once a year. Instead, we need people to think of it as a way of working, which we must keep alive throughout the year."

"I'd like to do smaller sample surveys more regularly so we can have more quick wins."

"We do our surveys every two years, but it takes almost that long to show we're acting on the results. To test and fix any bugs regularly would be more effective."

"We have discussed more regular pulse checks. When we get slicker, we will create quick check-ups."

"The Glassdoor website is great because it lets people give real-time, anonymous feedback."

“It shouldn’t be a once-a-year thing. We need to understand employee reactions to external events and things in the media as they happen. Our marketing analysts look at the reaction of messages among the public, but we’re far less effective at doing that internally. That’s a bit odd when you think about it. We have a great opportunity to treat employees as customers, with the same focus on monitoring their views and opinions.”

“The future is constant monitoring of the workforce, with real-time HPPY-style apps.”

### Greater speed

For many, timing is a key issue. The delay between survey completion and the communication of the final results is often many months. Too often, what was driving the agenda has changed and interviewees then questioned the relevancy of the research.

The long interval between completion and feedback means employees do not see any change for some time, which sends the wrong message.

“In an ideal world the turnaround would be quicker. The speed of the survey coming back has a real impact on whether people believe that something will actually happen as a result of it.”

“I’d like the follow-up to be immediate. Four months can go by until the results are announced.”

### Greater emphasis on insight and action

Those who spoke most enthusiastically about their approach and supplier are running a very different kind of survey alongside the standard annual questionnaire.

These HR professionals were more likely to tell us:

“Suppliers need to become engagement consultants rather than just survey providers.”

A minority of HR professional we spoke with had a deeper interest in engagement and has investigated models of engagement themselves.

“I’m interested in the neurological and psychological levers of engagement – and ensuring we use them all. The SCARF model – Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relationships and Fairness – identifies five core emotions hard-wired into our brains. This helps explain why engagement is an automatic response to how you are treated. If you take the four enablers from the Engage for Change report and overlay them on the SCARF model you find they match up. We use the SCARF model as part of our internal communications checklist.”

## The view from the other side

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How does the employee engagement survey measure up in eyes of participants? In total, we gathered views from around 100 employees, ranging in ages from 18 to 65, and working across a variety of sectors.

More than 70% had participated in an employee engagement survey. Of the 28% who had not, 84% said this was because their organisation does not run one. Some 10.5% were 'too busy' to participate and 5.26% 'just forgot' to take part. A similar percentage said: "I don't think my organisation really wants to listen to me."

## Key Findings

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Nearly **50%** of respondents would like to see improvements to the way their views are surveyed



Although more than **70%** say the survey is not a waste of their time, this leaves almost a third (27%) who take the opposing view

**65%**

say they are asked too many questions

**41%**

Less than half say they receive honest feedback on the results



**41%** do not believe senior managers value the survey process



Just over one-third (**36%**) can point to changes made as a result of the survey

**2.95**

On an effectiveness scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is highly ineffective and 5 is highly effective, the employee engagement survey scores 2.95

## What changes would employees make?

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Most responses focused on “more action taken on the back of the results”, and “senior leaders taking our views more seriously”. Many employees told us the priorities of the senior leadership team are wrong – rather than focusing on what staff are saying, they believe the primary focus is on achieving the highest possible response rate.

### Action

“The survey is only as good as the leaders that get the results and in an organisation as large as ours this can be variable.”

“Employee surveys are extremely valuable, however they need to be voluntary and the results need to be acted on.”

“I feel the survey results could be better used if colleague views were taken seriously by senior executives, and changes were made as a result.”

“I would welcome a staff survey if I felt it would be listened to and action taken as a result.”

“Lip service is paid to engagement because staff views are often ignored due to a business decision.”

### Honest feedback on the results

Several said the language used to communicate the launch and the results “feels staged”. Employees feel a spin is put on the results, which means they lack confidence in the integrity of the process.

### More interaction and greater frequency

“I’d like the process to be more interactive, with more opportunities for feedback.”

“More opportunities to say how we feel – the focus here seems to be on how we think the leadership team are doing.”

“If there is time, face-to-face discussions are always best as people open up more about how they feel.”





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#### Get in touch

If you would like to hear more, please  
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#### @abthinks

Join the conversation using  
**#surveyingthesurvey**

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