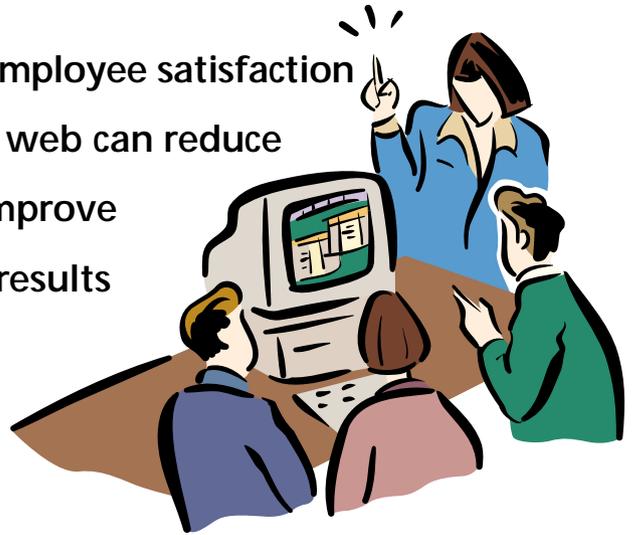


Survey says: Go online for better results

Moving your employee satisfaction surveys to the web can reduce the cost and improve the quality of results dramatically.

Here's why.



By Richard Nadler

In today's fast-paced business environment, making surveys easy and accessible ups their appeal. Response rates are typically higher on the web because surveys are simpler to fill out, and respondents can complete them at their convenience. You can also control the environment to avoid bad data. And web-based surveys save on analysis time, because results can be immediately analyzed and graphed without the risk of data entry or interpretation errors. The advent of inexpensive and easy to use web survey software has dramatically simplified employee satisfaction surveys.

Benchmarking success

Why bother to perform an employee satisfaction survey? The main reason is that dissatisfied employees tend to perform below their capabilities, leave their jobs relatively quickly and are not likely to recommend your company as an employer.

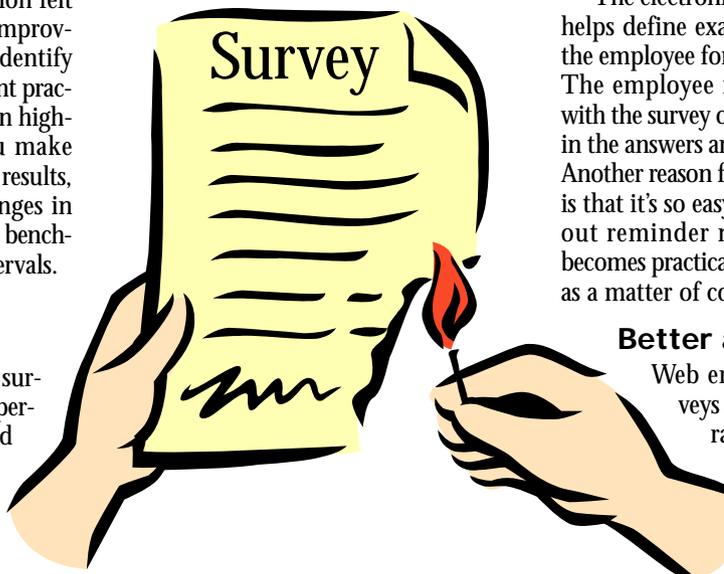
Measuring the level of satisfaction felt by employees is the first step to improving employee satisfaction. You'll identify policies, procedures and management practices that, if changed, could result in higher employee satisfaction. As you make improvements based on the survey results, you'll be able to measure the changes in employee satisfaction by performing benchmark surveys at specified time intervals.

Paper headaches

Why don't all companies regularly survey their employees? Traditional paper-based surveys can be expensive and time-consuming. First, you have to design the survey. Then, because paper surveys are usually mailed to the employee's home,

you have to print mailing labels and stuff the envelopes.

Once the surveys start coming back, you need to have someone key in the answers. When respondents don't follow instructions, the data entry person has to interpret the response, running the risk of inaccuracies. If the response rate is too low, it may be necessary to do one or more reminder mailings, which adds to the cost. That's why consultants typically charge between \$10,000 and \$20,000 to handle a satisfaction survey for a 1000-employee company. You can save money by doing it yourself, but the demands on your staff's time will be high.



Web survey efficiency

Web surveys are an entirely different story. You don't have to pay for printing, postage costs, mailing out reminders and typing the answers into your database. The cost of sending out the information to employees and collecting their responses is effectively zero. The only real cost is designing and publishing the survey on the web.

Higher response rate

The response rate for a web-based survey can typically be about 80 per cent, compared to 50 to 60 per cent for paper-based surveys. The main reason is that web surveys are easier to fill out.

The electronic interface of the web also helps define exactly what is requested of the employee for each particular question. The employee merely calls up the page with the survey on his or her browser, plugs in the answers and hits the submit button. Another reason for the higher response rate is that it's so easy and inexpensive to send out reminder notices via email that it becomes practical to send several reminders as a matter of course.

Better accuracy

Web employee satisfaction surveys also tend to be more accurate. It isn't possible to type in an off-the-wall response to a multiple-choice question. If you ask an employee

to rank the order of several items you can, for example, give them an error message if they don't identify an item as number one.

Software specially designed for web surveys automatically stores respondents' answers in a database. This eliminates the risk of a data entry person being unable to read a respondent's answer or simply making a typing error. The software can also produce reports and presentation charts that show the answers to every question in English, rather than the codes that are usually used as shorthand on response forms. The results can even be posted on the web, if desired.

Creating the survey

The reason that web surveys haven't really taken off has been the degree of difficulty involved in creating them. But the recent introduction of inexpensive and easy-to-use Windows-based survey tools like SurveySolutions for the Web has made creating web surveys almost as easy as keying in a letter. So there's no need to bring in a consultant or even get the IT department involved. Instead, the human resources department or any manager can create the survey without IT support.

The creator can simply type the entire survey, including questions and response choices, into a word processor—or take advantage of a library of templates, questions, scales and wizards to develop the survey. Response choices are formatted by simply selecting a response style from a pull-down menu.

Some of the most advanced programs even provide wizards to create questions that guide you step-by-step through the process of creating a single question. In one implementation, the wizard sequentially asks the user to enter a question's text, select a question type and then either create a custom scale or select a preformatted scale or response choice.

And a new generation of survey software has automated the process of gathering, analyzing and reporting the results. These tools automatically collect each sur-

vey, store it in a database table and offer predefined reports for presenting the results.

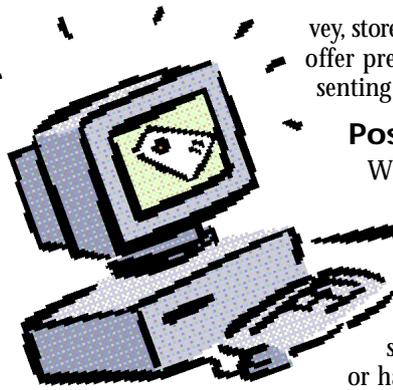
Posting to the web

Wizards are also typically provided to post the survey to your website. The wizard also provides a choice of having responses stored on the web server or having them emailed to a specific person.

The bottom line is that it has become as easy and inexpensive to do employee

surveys on the web as it is to provide product information to customers. This means that there's no longer any excuse not to keep close tabs on how your employees feel about the company and what you can do to increase their satisfaction. Many companies perform web surveys on a regular basis—quarterly instead of the normal once every year or two—in order to get regular feedback on how well employees are receiving their programs. ♦

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How to write your own survey

Here are some basic guidelines that can make your web-based employee satisfaction survey more effective.

1. Make the questions easy to understand.

Most people are not at the highest possible attention level when filling out a survey, so make sure that your questions are very simple to grasp. Phrase questions in a similar manner and use the same five- or 10-point scale throughout the survey.

2. Measure the importance as well as the performance.

Knowing how employees rate the company's performance in various areas is important. But in order to prioritize your action plan, you need to know how important each of these areas are. Suppose that employees tell you they don't like the pension plan, cafeteria food and parking facilities. That tells you that you have problems, but it doesn't tell where to start. Knowing that the pension plan is very important, parking facilities have medium importance and the cafeteria food is of least importance gives you a clear course of action.

3. Ask demographic questions.

Demographic questions make it possible to determine how closely the sample represents the total population and to analyze subgroups. For example, you might find that 30 per cent of your employees rate the health plan as poor or fair, but that 60 per cent of employees with children give the plan bad grades. Clearly there is a serious problem that would have been masked without the extra demographic information.

4. Compare your results to normative data.

Normative data, typically industry surveys conducted by magazines or research organizations, can be extremely useful in evaluating results. For example, suppose that 25 per cent of your employees say they think their salaries are too low and that this is the highest level of dissatisfaction with any of the items that you have surveyed. You'd be worried, right? However, if you also knew that industry-wide, 45 per cent of employees were unhappy with their salaries, that information would shed an entirely different light on the subject.