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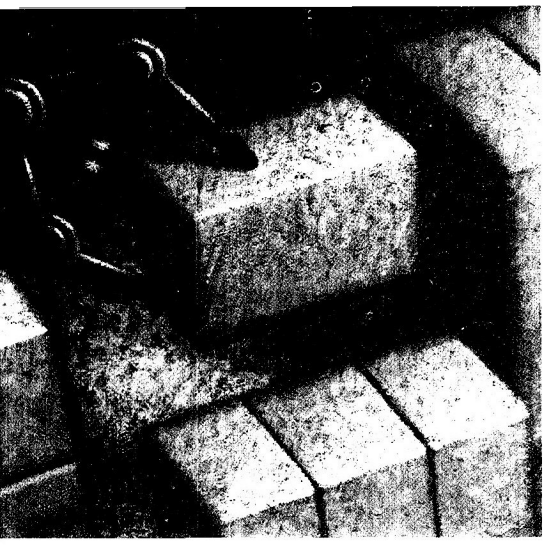

Employee Opinion Surveys in the Internet Age: Remember the Fundamentals

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The use of employee opinion surveys (EOSs) has exploded in recent years. The Internet and online Web survey services enabled managers to draft surveys, forward them to their employees and immediately review the feedback within hours. Survey responses are gathered, analyzed and easily reported through presentation charts and graphs. Managers became hooked on this ability to gain unprecedented access to their employees by quickly tapping on their shoulders and asking their opinions.

Unfortunately, this new ability to quickly and cheaply collect and process employee feedback caused managers to become shortsighted when considering the purpose, design, administration, and follow-up of an EOS. A poorly designed and administered EOS can create misleading information resulting in faulty decision-making and causing substantial damage to the employer-employee relationship. Being involved with hundreds of surveys over 30 years, the authors have found that EOSs often suffer from one or more of the following.

- Employees are either asked the wrong questions or the questions were poorly structured
- Survey methods caused bias and diminished the response rate
- Inappropriate statistical methods were used to analyze data

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- Faulty interpretations of survey findings were made
- Feedback to employees and other stakeholders was incomplete or omitted
- Implementation of changes suggested by the EOS were delayed or never occurred
- Employees perceived management as ignoring their input or were punished for being open and honest.

To avoid these problems, the questions in Figure 1 should be thoughtfully considered in determining whether to use an EOS. Answering the questions in Figure 1 is not a rhetorical exercise. Rather the questions represent fundamental issues that must be addressed if one hopes to obtain meaningful information from an EOS. The following steps provide a road map for effectively using the EOSs to improve productivity, enhance morale or identify employee problems. These fundamentals apply regardless of how the EOS is administered, with "pencil and paper" surveys or a survey conducted over the Internet.

FIGURE 1 **Questions to Answer Before Conducting an EOS**

- Why are you conducting the survey? What do you hope to find out?
- How will the survey uncover what you need to know? (The answer to this question is not always obvious.)
- How will you assure employees that their responses will not hurt them?
- How will you use the results?
- What type of feedback will you give employees, supervisors and management?
- Are you prepared to implement changes suggested by the EOS?

STEP 1: Articulate Clear and Meaningful Goals

EOSs can provide important insights into how employees feel about a wide variety of issues and should ultimately positively impact morale and productivity. To this end, the goals for conducting a survey should be carefully defined. Clearly articulated survey goals not only help one decide if an EOS is actually called for but also provides guidance for the survey's design and administration. Moreover, meaningful goals, clearly communicated to employees, contribute substantially to their willingness take the time to respond honestly to the survey. Reasons for conducting an EOS include:

- Discerning whether the vocal minority represents the silent majority
- Demonstrating to employees that their concerns are important to management
- Determining what needs to be done to create a more productive and satisfying work environment, e.g., enhance the company's ability to attract and retain employees or avoid a unionization effort
- Identifying issues that are important to employees or their priorities as they relate to pay, benefits or other rewards
- Providing needed feedback to organization leaders.

Care must be used in aligning goals for conducting a survey with the ability of employees to provide accurate information. For example, if management wants to know what makes effective teams or what type of organization climate makes a satisfactory team experience, one must survey employees who work in teams.

STEP 2: Secure Management Commitment and Allocate Adequate Resources

One important factor in deciding to conduct an EOS is management's willingness to support the survey and to respond appropriately to the feedback. If employees will be asked to express their opinions, they expect to receive survey feedback and for management to address their concerns by taking action. Management must clearly articulate why it's interested in employee opinions and how this feedback will be used.

Employees are not alone in needing to know the EOS goals. Managers at all levels need to understand the reasons for the survey; how it will improve the organization and possibly will affect them as individuals. Realistically, EOS findings

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can identify failures of management and highlight individuals who are unpopular, incompetent or violating important trusts. They also can reveal misunderstandings between employees and managers. Managers and first-line supervisors may question whether an EOS is worth the time and effort, and if they feel threatened, may even attempt to sabotage it. Involving managers and supervisor in the process and providing them with constructive feedback reduces this threat. Regardless of the methods used, senior management must clearly communicate to employees at every level why the survey is important and how the information will be used.

Often, costs for conducting an EOS are underestimated. Usually, the direct expenses from publishing the survey on a host Web site and working with external consultants to design and administer the survey can be accurately determined. However, costs associated with the time required for EOS communications, interpreting the findings, responding to employee concerns and making changes based on survey findings should be considered as well. If time requirements and associated costs are not considered, the EOS is likely to get "bogged down" and employees may question management's commitment to the process.

STEP 3: Design the EOS to Accomplish the Stated Purpose with Survey Respondents in Mind

Presurvey Interviews or Focus Groups

An effective method to identify issues concerning employees, supervisors and managers is to conduct unstructured interviews or focus groups. Employees who form a cross-sectional representation of the organization should be randomly selected for participation. Interviews can determine what should be included in the survey and provide insight into the terminology and vernacular one should use to construct survey statements that respondents will understand. Furthermore, interviews and focus groups build employee interest in the survey. Due to the confidentiality requirements of these one-on-one or group interviews, neutral outsiders or trusted HR representatives should facilitate them.

Variables and Measures

An EOS instrument is comprised of questions or statements (often called "items") designed to accurately discern employee opinions or attitudes about a variety of issues or what survey designers term "variables." Popular variables for EOS include job satisfaction, accuracy of performance ratings, trust in management,

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intent to quit and the supervisor's leadership style. The term "variable" is used because feelings, perceptions or opinions about these issues vary across individuals or change over time. For example, management may want to collect job satisfaction information as this variable often relates to employee turnover, (i.e., employees who possess higher job satisfaction are less likely to quit). Thus, job satisfaction and turnover are expected to vary in relationship to one another.

The goals for conducting an EOS determine the survey's variable measures. For example, if employee turnover is a chief concern, and management believes employee perceptions about their jobs contribute to this problem, then job perception variables (e.g., job satisfaction, job challenge and meaningfulness of work) must be included in the survey. The variables must be carefully defined so they can be accurately translated into statements or questions that become the measure.

A measure (or what some call a "scale") is set of statements or questions that, together, indicate how employees feel about the variable. A measure designed to determine intent to quit, shown in Figure 2, is a set of four statements that is often used to measure how likely employees are to leave the organization. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the kind of statements that are used to measure job satisfaction.

Usually employees respond to these statements on a Likert-type response scale. For example, a six-point Likert-type response scale gives an EOS respondent these choices: "strongly agree, agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, disagree, strongly disagree." Uneven

FIGURE 2 Measure Statements of "Intent to Quit"

- I am going to quit working for my organization real soon.
- I see myself working for my organization for a long time.
- I don't plan to be working for my organization much longer.
- I have started to consider my job options outside of my organization.

FIGURE 3 Measure Statements on "Job Satisfaction"

- At the end of the day, I feel good about the work I have done.
- I look forward to doing my job.
- I am unhappy with the work I have to do.
- I like the people with whom I work.
- In general, I am satisfied with my job.

response scales include a midpoint. This midpoint often is designed to be a neutral response such as "neither agree nor disagree." Some scales allow employees to opt out, indicating they either do not know or do not have an opinion about a statement.

Although employee feelings about certain issues or variables often are collected using multiple statements and Likert-scales, asking a straightforward question can be used to collect certain kinds of information. For example, "What is your birth date?"

Depending on the purpose, scope and survey's length, an EOS instrument may have five to 20 (or more) measures, each composed of several statements or questions (often called "items"). Each item has a response scale. The employees' ability and motivation to respond accurately often limits the survey's length. The authors have found that respondent fatigue sets in after 15 to 30 minutes. Given survey-length restrictions (everyone has questions they would like to add), keeping EOS goals firmly in mind helps one focus on the information that is most important, and therefore, which measures are most important to include.

Customized versus Standard or "Off-the-Shelf" Surveys

Books, the Internet, consultants and professors make numerous standardized EOSs available. The advantages of standardized EOSs are their availability for immediate use, ability to benchmark the employees' responses against other organizations and availability of statistical information indicating the validity and reliability of the survey measures. Standardized EOSs are often cheaper than custom-designed surveys

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A poorly planned rollout can cause uncontrolled bias or a poor response rate.

because the initial investment in designing the survey can be spread across organizational uses.

There are disadvantages to administering standard or "off-the-shelf" EOS instruments. First, the instrument may not collect needed information. Second, the survey's terminology may or may not fit your company's culture or nomenclature. For example, questions about employee relationships with their supervisors may be inappropriate in a high-performance teamwork environment. Third, qualitative benchmarking with other companies may not be perceived as appropriate or meaningful to either management or employees. Finally, a participative approach to a survey's construction can build commitment for employees to respond to the survey.

Of course, compromises exist. An EOS instrument can mix standardized measures and others built specifically for an organization.

Comment Section

Providing employees an opportunity to make general comments and to respond to specific statements can serve at least two purposes. First, employees have an opportunity to indicate their opinions in their own words about issues that the survey may not capture. Often employees expect to have this opportunity and are frustrated if not allowed to write comments. Second, management receives more detailed feedback on specific issues, enabling a deeper interpretation of the quantitative responses to survey measures.

However, a downside in allowing comments exists. First, respondents take additional time to complete the survey. Second, because comments are unstructured, they are difficult to analyze and interpret. Third, respondents may make unkind remarks about specific individuals, particularly managers. Finally, respondents may inadvertently include information allowing management to identify them. Reprisals may result.

Our experience indicates that an opportunity to make comments should be included. However, one must review the comments, remove those deemed offensive and "declassify" those remarks that identify their sources. Comments then can be categorized by issue for clearer interpretation. This can be time-consuming. Even with new software applications for processing comments, this task is labor-intensive. The task's sensitivity is suited for an outside source or trusted internal representatives. The best way to reduce extensive comments is to include issues important to employees as measures in the EOS.

Pilot Test the Survey

No matter how much time is spent designing an EOS, it may not measure exactly what it was intended to assess. As a result, we *strongly* suggest that the survey undergo a pilot test with a group of employees similar to those to be surveyed. A pilot test is most useful when the EOS is administered to several small groups of employees (five to seven); followed immediately

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with small group discussions concerning the clarity of survey instructions and how specific statements were interpreted. If enough respondents complete surveys during the pilot test (i.e., a sample over 75), the survey's measures can be statistically examined to determine degrees of validity and reliability. However, since pilot tests often involve a smaller sample, one often must be satisfied with a more qualitative evaluation of the measures.

Using standard measures with the survey reviewed by experts can help ensure that collected information accurately measures what is intended. Finally, it is important to confirm with senior management that if employees systematically express concerns on the survey, these concerns will be addressed.

Different Cultures and Languages

Since many organizations operate internationally, the survey applications in multiple countries and cultures may be an issue. Preparing an EOS for use in a different culture with a different language requires special considerations to achieve linguistic equivalence. Cross-cultural or within-foreign-culture surveys usually involve the translation of measures, even for other English-speaking cultures. Translation requires sensitivity to variables or measures having a common (core) meaning across the cultures under study, while *trying to avoid or at least not compare* measures that differ across cultures. In other words, some measures may not mean the same across cultures, even if the words are carefully translated. To reduce the possibility of error, items should be short, simple sentences. Avoid metaphors and colloquialisms, and add sentences and illustrations to provide context. To avoid potential problems, use highly skilled translators and carefully pilot test the survey with employees from the target cultures. Debrief the respondents to be certain they place the same meaning on words and phrases in the survey.

STEP 4: Properly Administer the EOS

A proper EOS administration is carefully balanced between maintaining strict respondent confidentiality while generating a high response rate with minimal operational disruption and expense. Reaching this balance can be summed up in two words — *planning* and *communication*. No matter how often an EOS is given to the same employee group, a poorly planned rollout can cause uncontrolled bias or a poor response rate.

Communicate, Communication, Communicate

As mentioned in Step Two and Step Three, communication is critical to an EOS's successful administration. Regardless of the medium (pencil and paper or Web-based), employees must know the reasons for, the when and the how. To obtain a high response rate and data accurately reflecting what employees think, you must make sure employees believe that the survey is asking about meaningful issues, their responses are confidential and their feedback is important to management.

An EOS should have clear and precise instructions. Provide examples for sections that may confuse the respondent. If a survey asks respondents to rank order a series of employee benefits, make sure they understand the top choice is Number 1 and not Number 10. Such detailed instructions may sound superfluous, but it is better to have accurate responses than an entire survey section scrapped because employees responded in different ways.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Although anonymity and a promise of confidentiality are two different concepts, both are critical so employees believe that their honest (i.e., nonbiased) responses to the survey will not result in reprisal. Instructions should state not to affix names or other personal identifiers on completed surveys. Furthermore, supervisors and managers should not be present when the surveys are

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Employees who have no opportunity to complete the survey may feel resentment that their input was not solicited and resist changes suggested by the EOS.

taken nor should they inspect or handle the completed surveys. Required demographic information should be limited. If asked to disclose gender, race, work shift and occupation, it may be enough to identify a person. Anonymity and confidentiality concerns are often the reason that consultants or professors collect and process employee attitude surveys for organizations.

Circumstances sometimes exist where the EOS's purpose makes anonymity impractical. For example, to determine the relationship between employee attitudes to individual performance or absenteeism, attitudinal responses must match previous employment data. We asked employees to identify themselves in several different administrations of EOSs. Upon examining the scores and talking with employees, we believe asking for their names on the questionnaire did not substantially bias their response. The limited negative impact was probably due to our status as trusted outsiders.

Sampling an Employee Population

As a general rule, a minimum of 75 completed surveys is required to conduct simple statistical analysis of the survey measures and 150 for more sophisticated analysis. As long as the sample reaches the minimum number for analysis and randomly represents the group of employees, it typically is irrelevant if the sample is 70 percent, 40 percent or even 20 percent of the total employee population. However, it has been our experience that at least a 50-percent response rate from the employee population is necessary for management to feel it has a mandate to act on employee concerns and for employees to feel that the survey findings represent their opinions.

The *margin of error* indicates that survey findings can fall within a specific percentage range. For example, if a survey finding reports an employee attitude of 77 percent favorable with a margin of error of +/- 3 percent, this finding could be as high as 80 percent and as low as 74 percent. Typically, this is not an issue simply because the sample size relative to the population of employees is relatively large for EOSs, i.e., typically over 25 percent.

Although sampling an employee group seems like a more efficient way to collect valid and reliable employee attitudinal data, employees who have no opportunity to complete the survey may feel resentment that their input was not solicited and resist changes suggested by the EOS. The decision to sample an employee group must be carefully explained to all employees.

Paper or Web-based Administration

There are several methods to collect survey responses.

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Until recently, paper EOSs were the standard. Completed paper surveys were input by hand or optically scanned into a database. A dependable method is to have an unbiased or independent facilitator administer a paper survey to small groups of employees (20 to 30) during work time in a conference room. However, costs and logistics may make this approach impractical. Thus, companies may request the employee to individually complete a paper EOS on the job or at home. However, the response rate is typically much lower and the response data quality suspect because the survey is completed in noncontrolled environment. The employee completes the survey while watching television, for example.

To reduce costs and speed the EOSs data processing, the administration of EOSs through intranet or Internet Web sites has become the preferred method. However, employees need to be reassured that their individual responses are secure and will not be seen by management, supervisors or peers. Since most workers may suspect or know that computer linkages can be traced, utilizing a trusted outsider (with an outside Web site) may be required to reassure employees that their individual responses will not be read by management.

STEP 5: Analyze the Data Using the Appropriate Methods

Cleaning the Data

Before analyzing data, it must be cleaned to purge surveys or parts of surveys that may contaminate the findings. Contamination can be caused by improperly completed surveys due to individual literacy problems (more of a problem then one might expect), or the employees do not respond consistently to the statements. Simply examining the survey for incomplete responses or response patterns that make no sense can spot many of these problems. Placing negatively scored statements (e.g., "I do not feel like a valued member of my organization") as cross checks can help identify problem surveys. Unless you use negatively worded items frequently, in over 25 percent of the statements, individuals may inadvertently misscore these items. Means, standard deviations and frequency distributions often determine if initial "red flags" such as response outliers or improperly scored responses in the data exist. In any event, individual responses (i.e., surveys) should be removed from the database only when the problems are obvious.

Data Analysis

Before "crunching the numbers" and generating results, survey data should be analyzed to determine if the measures are valid and reliable. Factor analysis, alpha coefficients and more sophisticated statistical methods test for measure reliability and validity. Based on these tests and an understanding of what one is attempting to measure, selected items (i.e., statements) or measures may be dropped from further analysis.

A variety of statistical techniques, such as correlation, analysis of variance (ANOVA), multiple regression, time series analysis and path analysis are used to determine if significant relationships exist among the measures collected. Comparisons also can be made across important occupations, departments, locations or a previously administered EOS. For example, are there differences in job satisfaction based on where employees work?

No matter how sophisticated and telling the statistical analysis, interpreting the findings requires time, expertise and understanding the organization. Involving experts in EOS design and statistical methodologies is helpful.

STEP 6: Interpret and Communicate EOS Findings

Interpreting the Findings

When interpreting the EOS findings, ask the "why" behind them and avoid a common management response of trying to justify or find blame when

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employee responses indicate room for improvement. Senior leadership, supervisors and employees can provide deeper insights into the survey findings. Multiple sessions containing a representational cross section of company leadership and employees allow for an enlightening discussion and interpretation of the findings. These meetings deepen one's understanding of employee opinions and feelings. They also build commitment to changes suggested by the findings.

Look for themes and interrelationships across the survey variables. Attempts to identify every nuance in the data can result in overinterpreting the findings.

When examining the relationship between two or more variables, there exists a tendency to conclude that change in one variable is the cause of changes in another variable (i.e. one variable is the cause of another variable). One must recognize that causality is difficult to prove and typically requires a sophisticated research design. However, causality may be inferred based on sound theory and other supporting evidence including common sense.

Communicating the Findings

A summary of the EOS findings — both positive and negative — should, at the minimum, be reported to the respondents, their managers and union representatives (if a union is present). However, data indicating how a specific individual may have responded must be protected. One way to avoid the pressure that senior managers can exert is to have an outsider collect and hold the data. After data analysis, completed surveys should be destroyed.

Feedback is meaningful when presented in multiple forms. A short written report summarizing the findings is helpful. Employee meetings to discuss findings within their work areas are generally appreciated. Feedback specifically focusing on a team, department or location can be particularly meaningful when discussed at this level. However, if employees are given total access to the findings, instruction on how to interpret these findings must be provided.

To achieve the full value of conducting an EOS, communications must start at the beginning of the process and be systematically carried through to the implementation of recommendations. However, it is

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not enough to simply tell employees what is happening. They must feel that the information affects them and will improve their work environment or outcomes.

STEP 7: Take Action and Quickly

Informal Contract

If findings indicate employee issues and concerns need to be addressed, change is necessary. These changes must address specific issues and concerns revealed by the EOS. Most efforts falter in this area, and it is where substantial damage to the employee-employer relationship happens. Once senior management reviews the survey findings, suggested changes often languish. This happens because changes are difficult or management has not committed the resources necessary to implement them. Furthermore, managers often are committed to the status quo and are dealing with other pressing issues.

The EOS process will likely identify employee concerns that cannot be addressed for a variety of reasons. In those cases, management must explain why no action will be taken. For example, employees may express substantial dissatisfaction with pay levels. Managers should not ignore employee dissatisfaction but explain why pay levels are positioned where they are. Be careful not to promise specific changes at the start of or during the EOS process. Managers do not want to promise, or appear to promise, something they cannot deliver. If promises were made, they should be implemented in a timely manner. To not do so will adversely impact management credibility.

Strategic Implementation Process

A strategic implementation process carefully blueprints and orchestrates a series of action plans. Absent the support of a well-structured plan, managed change is unlikely. The characteristics of successful implementation plans include:

- Establishing a detailed strategic plan for change based on the vision and goals for conducting the EOS
- Securing senior-level sponsorship of and commitment to the EOS process where the authority exists to secure personal and financial resources required for success
- Communicating a summarized version of the survey's findings along with the action implementation process' vision and goals
- Involving highly motivated, talented and creative employees from all functions and levels of the organization; include those who are respected by their peers and unafraid to speak their opinions, and a few individuals who are cautiously resistant to the proposed change process
- Breaking the desired changes into documented, unambiguous action plans with realistic timetables and required resources; do not try to do everything at once
- Planning for quick "victories" of change early on (within first three months) to build credibility, momentum and confidence
- Providing the necessary training and skill building to support the planned change.

Follow up

Managers often are disappointed in how employees respond to major change efforts resulting from recommendations formulated through the EOS process. The causes of this disappointment are often the management's failure to follow up with employees and to tell them what changed and how they benefited. Even though managers may be involved on almost a daily basis in changes impacting the company, employees often do not appreciate the effort management invests or may not attribute the change to the input they gave through the EOS. Employees need help "connecting the dots."

Management must recognize that just because we respond to employee concerns and needs today, does not mean the new issues and needs do not surface in the future. Just like demand for company goods/

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services and its financial health change, so do employee needs. We believe conducting an EOS every 18 to 24 months is appropriate. Having a consistent process for obtaining and responding to employee input will create a work environment where employees feel management listens and responds to their concerns. The efficiency and effectiveness of conducting an EOS will improve if the process becomes a regular organizational event. The EOS process' ultimate value depends on established, clear expectations and management demonstrating a willingness to listen and to make necessary changes in a timely manner.

Remember, EOSs are only one method of listening and responding to employee concerns. Performance appraisals, "town meetings," lunch in the company cafeteria, open-door policies and many other methods should be in place to keep the lines of communication open. WJ

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