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Employee Surveys: Putting Out Feelers And Fires

Susan A. Lill : Align HR Services

Employee opinion or satisfaction surveys are widely used to gather information from employees about shared areas of interest and concern about their workplace. In fact, employee surveys are often part of the requirement to maintain selected quality certifications, for example, TS certification in the automotive supplier industry.

WHY ARE THEY USED

Surveys are used to gather quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (words) about how people view various aspects of their employment "value proposition". Results can lead to reforms or be used to support Human Resources planning efforts.

Not asking for employee input can lead to benefit plans, policies or programs being built upon assumptions by the HR or ment team. With precious time and resources in many places, employers can ill afford to solve the wrong problem.

Surveys are often seen as objective and especially if the response rate is high (e.g. 70% or higher), are valid instruments that attempt to measure of levels of satisfaction, attitudes, beliefs, opinions and gather input about what is working well or not well.

METHODOLOGY

Firstly, without question, responses should be treated as anonymous. Removing any real or perceived fears or restrictions will free employees up to provide candid feedback and that's really what you want to have.

Giving employees some notice about an upcoming survey using various methods over a 2 week period preceding the survey, helps to set their minds and avoid surprises. The notice should explain the reason for the survey, how responses will be used, that it is anonymous (and ideally administered by a neutral third party with extensive survey experience) and when and where the survey will take place.

Supervisors should be briefed to ensure they allow full and unrestricted access for employees to take the survey and in fact, should encourage high levels of participation from their department.

Thanks to technology there are multiple ways of collecting and assimilating data from employee surveys. The 3 primary methods used are:

1. Paper-based surveys sent and received via mail.
2. Paper-based surveys administered onsite.
3. Electronic surveys administered via the Internet (or company Intranet).

Surveys sent by mail risk lower response rates and potential tampering with survey responses. Resources are often not available to answer questions or provide clarification about questions from respondents. The advantage however is that employees often complete these surveys at home at their own pace and interruptions in work schedules are minimized.

Surveys administered onsite are effective, in particular if administered by a neutral third party. The survey company can supervise and control the completion process and be available to respond to questions. This method does require a commitment on the part of the company to set aside a large room, provide employee rosters and permit employees to take 20-30 minutes away from their work stations.

Surveys administered electronically have the advantage of avoiding double data entry (e.g. for paper surveys, the employee responds on paper and then the data is entered into a database creating a potentially small margin of error). On the other hand, some employees may struggle with the use of computer equipment if not used as part of their usual job or home routine and this method still requires onsite supervision, especially if there are any connectivity or access issues that arise.

Serious consideration should be given to the design of the survey. If year-to-year comparisons might be likely, then that needs to taken in to account in how both the survey and the database are designed.

Regardless of the method, the format of the survey can also vary. Some surveyors prefer a forced ranking or selection method (e.g. multiple choice answers), others prefer Tues/False statements and Open Comments section, while others again prefer to gage the level of satisfaction on a scale under each comment or question.

I'd strongly recommend employers consider collecting both a rating (level of agreement) and weighting (level of importance) under each question (or positive statement) to ensure prioritization can be given to the responses.

For example, let’s look at how this survey “question” is structured:

1. My supervisor is usually available and approachable when I have a concern.

Indicate Your Level of Agreement With The Above Statement.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

How important is this to you?

☐ Very High Importance ☐ High Importance ☐ Average Importance ☐ Low Importance ☐ Not Important

By collecting two data points for each statement, survey administrators can sort the data beginning with those questions with the highest level of disagreement and the highest level of importance. This greatly helps employers prioritize what areas of concern they begin to address shortly after the survey is over.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Additional sorting of survey data can occur if information such as department, length of service or FLSA status is asked for. Patterns of concern may be able to be traced back to one area of the organization where the area scores more poorly versus the organization as a whole. Asking for race and gender is touchy and you’d have to be able to clearly defend why you decided to ask for that information (e.g. part of a major diversity initiative). If there is an Open Comments section, responses or remarks that are potentially inflammatory or point to legal issues can potentially be flagged as originating in a particular area or with a certain group. Think ahead about how you plan to sort through pages and pages of comments.

REPORTING

Before finalizing the design or your survey form and process, start with the end in mind. What types of reports do you want from the survey database? Using a simple MS Access database can provide a robust platform for various machinations of data but must be designed knowing that up front. Building functionality back into a database after the fact can be difficult.

AFTER THE SURVEY

For employers, remember that the real heavy lifting of the survey process starts when the survey is over. Proper communication of results to the management team, then abbreviated results to the organizations' employees is critical for gaining any buy-in to subsequent action plans. The information should be shared as soon as possible after the survey and in-person so some questions can be asked and answered.

At times survey results may point to conflicting issues; comments may not be clearly explained or more information is needed. That's a great time to conduct Focus Groups. Focus Groups are small working sessions, facilitated by a professional, designed to gather more specific examples from a cross-section of survey respondents.

Surveys require an investment of time, money and resources so every effort to optimize the process should be considered. By planning carefully, employers can set a clearer path forward after the survey and hopefully put out fires as well as feelers.

Article written by Susan A. Lill, SPHR – President, Align HR Services Align HR Services is located in Greenville, SC. and specializes in administering employee surveys.

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Author

Susan A. Lill
susan@aerie-corp.com
www.alignhrservices.com

Align HR Services, a division of AERIE Corporation, was started in 2002 by Susan A. Lill, a AERIE partner and co-founder. Align HR Services is focused on helping organizations ensure their human resources systems and processes are integrated with the mission and objectives of the business. Susan also assists businesses to develop and implement cultural awareness and diversity initiatives. Susan is a certified diversity trainer by the Society of Human Resources Management.

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