



Employee Surveys

Practical Guidelines

This guide provides advice and pointers on conducting employee surveys, from start to finish.

MANAGERS OFTEN HAVE QUESTIONS, SUCH AS:

Should we carry out employee surveys in our company?
Will it be worth the effort? Will it enhance our performance?
Or, could effects be negative?

 **You should carry out people surveys because:**

- You "have to": The Working Environment Act states that all companies must risk assess their psychosocial work environment.
- Research clearly demonstrates that emphasis on human resources
 - a) increases the profitability of the company, and
 - b) reduces sick-leave, increases engagement, well-being, and motivation.

 **You should not carry out employee surveys if:**

- There is a desire among employees to enforce changes that cannot be met by company management.
- There are deep, ongoing conflicts in the company.
- There is a desire to get rid of "bad" leaders, or "difficult" employees.



Employee surveys, work environment surveys, people surveys, psychosocial risk assessment and employee satisfaction surveys are in principle the same thing. In this guide, we have chosen employee surveys as a collective term.



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The six phases of an employee survey are:

 <p>1. Preparations</p>	<p>What should you consider before getting started with the survey?</p>
 <p>2. Anchoring and Implementation</p>	<p>How do we ensure that we get everybody on board? How do we, in practical terms, conduct the survey?</p>
 <p>3. Reporting visualisations of the results</p>	<p>What should the end result look like?</p>
 <p>4. Feedback and Discussion</p>	<p>How should we communicate the results to the employees?</p>
 <p>5. Implementing Measures</p>	<p>Which practical measures or steps should we take now?</p>
 <p>6. Evaluation</p>	<p>Did we achieve what we set out to with the survey?</p>



Preparations

Initially, it is important to assess what should be measured and how measuring should be conducted.

A. What should be measured?

- ✓ **It is advisable to measure topics that have a large impact on motivation, stress and burnout. Research shows that these topics are:**
 - Perceived supervisory support.
 - Perceived support and help from colleagues.
 - A high degree of autonomy, i.e. a degree or level of freedom and discretion allowed to an employee over his or her job.
 - Performance feedback, i.e. degree and quality of feedback regarding the job.
 - Absence of very high levels of mental demands (complicated tasks, time pressure, pressure to produce), emotional demands (from clients or customers) and/or physical demands (physical strain).
- ✓ **It is advisable to measure topics that have strategic relevance in your company, such as:**
 - Customer focus.
 - Organisational efficiency (the degree of importance placed on employee efficiency and productivity at work).
 - Quality (the emphasis given to quality procedures).
 - Innovation capability (the extent of encouragement and support for new ideas and innovative approaches).
 - Reflexivity (a concern with reviewing and reflecting upon objectives, strategies, and work processes, in order to adapt to the wider environment).
 - Integration (the extent of interdepartmental trust and cooperation)
 - Teamwork.

Poorly executed employee surveys will result in you knowing less than you knew prior to conducting the survey. This can be both unethical (falsely stating that a negative work environment is positive) and expensive for the company (implementing actions based on faulty information).

✔ **It is advisable to measure topics related to the Working Environment Act, such as:**

- Employee involvement (that employees have considerable influence over decision making).
- Support and help from colleagues.
- Training and development (concerning employees personal and professional development).
- Variation of tasks (The degree to which a job requires various activities).

✘ **As a rule, it is not advisable to measure topics such as:**

- Bullying, harassment and violence. The company should have separate means of registering such incidents.
- Physical work environment. The company should carry out HSE risk assessments, independently of the employee survey.
- Physical and psychological disease. Measuring these topics rarely have positive effects, and is problematic with reference to the Personal Data Act.

B. How to measure



How to measure:

- The best processes can be obtained by using questionnaires, preferably in combination with well executed feedback sessions. This also applies to small businesses. You should use research based, validated scales to measure the topics you think are most important in your organisation. Non-validated scales and questionnaires may, at worst, exacerbate the working environment.
- You should entrust the computation and visualisation of results to an external consultant, unless you have someone with specific (psychometric) measuring competency in your HR department.



How not to measure:

- You should not use singular questions or items to map the work environment. Doing so will give an inaccurate picture of the state of your business.
- You should not use so-called indexes, i.e. calculating means of single items that are not part of a validated scale. Such indexes might be referred to as "satisfaction" indexes.
- If you choose to use qualitative means of mapping instead, such as SWOT analysis, focus groups, interviews and the like, note that these methods are prone to subjectivity and will often not provide representative results of the population.

Small businesses that do not want to conduct quantitative surveys should use structured group processes, such as focus groups or individual interviews



A validated, research based scale is a collection of individual items that as a whole evidently measures what it is intended to measure (e.g. that the measurement scale "participation" actually captures the perceived level of participation, and not something else), and that what is measured actually has real world effects (e.g. increased motivation leading to increased performance).

Well executed employee surveys gives an ideal starting point for increasing performance and motivation, lowering turnover and sick-leave, and improving the profit margins of the company.



Anchoring and implementation

The survey process should always begin with a decision in the company's Working Environment Committee (WEC) for companies that have one. If not, health and safety representatives or union representatives should be included in the discussion from the outset. The company management has the final say in what to measure and how, but it is always advisable to involve employee representatives.

The survey process should be firmly anchored in the top management team (TMT) of the company. The TMT should have a clear idea of how the results could be used in order to enforce the business strategy of the company.

Who is responsible for what in the process? What is the role of HR, TMT, WEC, union representatives and HSE staff, respectively? Normally, HR is operationally responsible for the actual implementation, but the other roles need to be clarified too.

Information should be provided to all employees prior to distributing the survey, for example through open meetings, intranet news or the like. Inform about the background for the survey, implementation, and, important-

ly, about the follow-up phase with a scheduled time line. Provide information regarding handling of sensitive data (anonymity), feedback format and other factors that may affect employees' ability and motivation to respond to the survey.

Motivate the employees to partake in the survey. It is an advantage if the manager general leads the way, and explains why the survey process is critical to the company.

Managers should not respond to the survey, as they are normally a subject of evaluation in the survey. It does not make sense that the manager evaluates herself. Furthermore, one can assume that the perspective of the leader is very different from the perspective of the employee, and this might compromise the data.

The scales used in the survey should be rooted in the kind of work that take place in the company (e.g. nightshift work, emotionally demanding work with customers or clients, lonesome work, mentally demanding work, time pressure demands, work-home interference issues and so forth).

If you are collecting personal data, the Data Protection Authorities should be notified 30 days in advance.

You need to make sure that the employees give their explicitly informed consent to participating in the survey.

You need to assess to what extent the data you collect are considered sensitive or not. If so, you need to apply to (as opposed to notifying) the Data Protection Authorities in advance.



At a minimum, you want a response rate of 70-75 percent. In individual units, you can accept less than a 50 percent response rate, but results should be handled with care.



Reporting and visualisations of the results

A good report highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the company, both at the organisation level, and at the individual unit/department level. Results at the organisation level is most interesting for senior management and WEC, whereas results at the unit level is interesting for employees and middle managers.

At the organisation level, one should:

- Compare the results against national or international benchmarks
- Assess trends: Are the results moving in a positive or negative direction since the last survey?
- Assess to what degree individual units or departments deviate in a positive or negative fashion (risk-assessment).
- Use socio-demographic variables (such as age, gender, position and so forth) to assess to what degree there are systematic differences between groups of employees.
- Use regression analysis to discover which factors (scales) in the company that contribute to performance, motivation, burnout, commitment and the like.

At the individual section/department, one should:

- Compare the individual unit level scores with the organisation level scores
- Assess the individual units' score on each scale: Which scores are high and which are low, respectively?
- Assess trends: How has the scores evolved since the last survey? Has the unit met its goals?
- Assess differences (variation) between individual employees in the unit. Do the employees see their work environment similarly (high degree of agreement), or are there discrepancies (e.g. different sub-groups)?



In cases where the Labour Inspection Authorities conducts audits, the company should be prepared to document psychosocial work environment hazards by disclosing a structured risk analysis.

Comparison with other organizations (benchmarks) can provide ample information, but can also be like comparing pears to apples. Normative visualisations of results (e.g. red, yellow and green signals) may overshadow strategically important nuances.



Feedback and Discussion

A survey feedback meeting

is a structured and constructive dialogue on the relationship between the results of the employee survey (what we measured) and the specific work day context (what we do). Survey feedback meetings takes place at department/unit level - not at the organisation level.

Open meetings are well suited for feedback on overall findings, but only as a supplement to survey feedback meetings at the department/unit level.

A survey feedback meeting

may start with an informal discussion on the state of the department/unit. What are our main strengths and weaknesses today? consequently, the process leader/consultant should review the overall results (with a focus on average), and pick out a few findings that deserve additional discussion and dialogue. This dialogue provides a good basis for developing actions.

The leader of the department/unit should ideally not be the process leader of the meeting, who instead should focus on participating in the discussion.

Well executed survey feedback meetings are necessary for the success of the entire project, and might even be considered as a means of action in and of itself. Research clearly shows that survey feedback meetings will shape perceptions of the psychosocial work environment (increased autonomy and social cooperation), and add to the organisations net earnings (e.g. by reduced sick-leave).

The survey follow-up is maybe the most important phase in order to achieve overall success of the project!

✔ **A survey feedback meeting is:**

- Structured reflection and dialogue in a safe and caring environment.
- Focus on (critique of) roles, not individuals.
- Forward looking:
How can we improve the way we work together? Which measures should we implement?

✘ **A survey feedback meeting is not:**

- A lecture, presentation, or monologue.
- A venue for fights and conflicts.
- An opportunity for management to find out who is «loyal», or not.
- A venue for discussing statistical and methodological details.





Implementing measures

Mid-level management is responsible for developing its own department/unit, whereas senior management (TMT) is responsible for topics that cut across units, and are valid in the whole company. Some measures can be implemented at the organization level (e.g. stress management training), while other might be implemented at the department/unit level (e.g. shorter meetings or increasing the number of physical meeting points). Measures can be implemented at individual level (skills, knowledge or abilities), group level (e.g. team skills) or even at management level (e.g. leadership development programs).

Research highlights the following most successful criteria:

- Sufficient resources.
- Commitment from top management.
- Involvement from mid-level management.
- Involvement of employees and their representatives.
- Action plans with clear goals, roles and a set timeline.
- Change management skills.
- Communicating success (however small) early on.
- Celebration of achievements.

Efficient measures arise in the intersection between the results from the study (statistics), research based knowledge on how and when measures actually work, and participation (survey feedback meetings).



Evaluation

In every employee survey process there are many small and large decisions to be made. The survey feedback meeting is a suitable venue for getting feedback from the employees regarding the entire process. Some points for reflection might be:

- Did the response categories make sense?
- Did we measure the topics that were the most important for the company?
- Did we measure at the appropriate organisational level?
- Did the survey feedback meetings work according to plan?
- Did the employees receive correct and timely information before the survey, and before the survey feedback meeting?
- Were there results followed up by appropriate measures?
- Did the management find the results useful and actionable?

How often should employee surveys be carried out?

Organisations with a stable external environment should measure every other year as a minimum. If the context is less stable (large changes in short periods of time), one should consider measuring every year, and sometimes even more frequently.

SHOULD YOU USE EXTERNAL CONSULTANTS?

To what extent should one use external consultants, and if so, to which tasks?

Implementation of good employee surveys require craftsmanship. Poorly conducted surveys often lead to deep and lasting skepticism regarding such processes and, at worst, could inflict distrust between employer and employee. For this reason, many choose to outsource all or part of the survey execution to external consultants.

Central tasks that might be outsourced to consultants:

- Constructing a reliable and valid questionnaire that cover the most important aspects for the individual company (or providing off-the-shelf solutions).
- Processing and visualisations of data.
- Reporting and risk analysis.
- Survey feedback meetings.

Good employee survey consultants:

- Offer research based measurement scales (valid, reliable, relevant).
- Act as support for mid-level managers and the top management team.
- Focus on positive aspects and are oriented towards change.
- Dare to speak up about factors that are negative and needs to be changed.
- Offer consultants that are trained in industrial and organizational psychology.
- Are partners, also after the process is over.



If you do not want to use external consultants, the internal HR division might be a good place to find people that can be trained in the processes described in these guidelines.

