

Ten Traps to Avoid with Employee Opinion Surveys - By Jim Houran

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Employee Opinion Surveys can offer a strong ROI for organizations wanting to improve their business operations and relationships. However, these surveys are often compromised by ten critical pitfalls. Learn about these traps and how to avoid them.

The most productive and successful organizations maintain strong internal Operations and strong internal and external Relationships with all touch points of the business. However, many organizations have never had the opportunity to evaluate themselves impartially and professionally on these two key outcomes. That is the ultimate purpose of Employee Opinion or Climate Surveys, and they should be conducted at least once a year. That said, critically assess your approach before you start a new survey program or prepare to launch the survey process upon which you currently rely. In particular, there are ten predictable pitfalls that prevent organizations from conducting useful Employee Opinion Surveys. Any one of these traps can substantially compromise the ROI you anticipated from the survey in the first place:

Trap 1: No impartial survey partner. Use a third party to administer and analyze the survey to ensure objectivity and to encourage candid feedback from respondents. Employee Opinion Surveys that are perceived as being a credible and 'safe' forum by employees typically do not necessarily require additional incentives for participation.

Trap 2: No validated survey. Organizations should not develop custom content such as statements to be rated or open-ended questions on their own unless they have a questionnaire expert on staff. Writing survey questions seems simple and easy, but there is a science to it. For more information about this issue, see:

www.2020skills.com/asts/Three%20Things%20to%20Know%20Before%20Conducting%20Your%20Own%20Surveys.pdf.

Rather than 'throw together' a list of questions whose meaningfulness is unknown, use an established survey. Select only providers whose surveys are well-validated and conform to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing. In this way organizations can trust that the survey content is relevant and unbiased with respect to employees of different backgrounds.

Trap 3: No comprehensive survey. Employee Opinion Surveys should measure more than subjective 'employee satisfaction.' The most useful surveys measure aspects of an organization's business practices (Operations) and manner in which an organization deals with its internal and external customers (Social Maintenance).

Trap 4: No consistent format. Use an online survey format to maximize confidentiality, response rate, efficiency and accuracy of the data collection. Plus, online surveys are more eco-friendly and cost effective compared to traditional pencil-and-paper formats... and often the results are available faster.

Trap 5: No emphasis on behaviors. Frame open-ended questions in the context of behaviors, not simply attitudes. This helps to ensure you receive specific and actionable feedback. For example, a company might ask employees: 'Do you like working here?' or 'Do you feel our organization satisfies its customers?' These types of questions often fail to extract concrete information on behaviors that is needed to build effective action plans for improving service quality. By contrast, we at 20|20 use two default probing questions: 'What is the organization doing right to meet the needs of its employees and customers?' and 'How can the organization improve in meeting the needs of its employees and customers?' The value with these approaches is that the questions now target specific behaviors in specific settings.

Trap 6: No proper data analysis. Most people who conduct surveys turnaround and analyze the data with outdated methods such as percentile rankings, percentages or raw-score sums. These approaches give only overly general information at best and downright misleading information at worst. This is because these approaches fail to detect and take into account response biases related to respondents' age, gender and other background factors. When accuracy and validity of outcomes is critical, the best analytics to use are Item Response Theory. These are the same gold standard statistics used in such well-known assessments like the GRE, MCAT and LSAT. Item Response Theory also provides richer, more actionable information than traditional approaches.

Trap 7: No segmented data for optimal impact. When sample size permits, have separate reports for different departments, divisions or properties. Analyses that aggregate results across the entire organization can mask important information. There might be an overarching company culture, but divisions or departments can have small but significant deviations from the umbrella culture that can impact survey responses. We recommend segmented reports for teams with ten or more employees.

Trap 8: No timely communication of survey results to employees. Research shows that Employee Opinion Surveys add at least 0.70% to the balance sheet when organizations act on the results. Other benefits include increased employee retention, satisfaction and productivity. Therefore, present survey feedback to staff within 30 days of survey completion and develop action plans to address areas of concern within 60 days of survey completion.

Trap 9: No selective or strategic action planning of survey results. It is important to know that Operations and Social Maintenance issues are all interrelated. This is a strategic advantage, because it means that organizations can make substantial and positive impacts in the workplace without necessarily having to make wide, sweeping changes. Greater results are achieved if you impact key issues that will produce a domino effect. From among the survey results, decide on an action plan that best suits your needs and act on best predictors that will have greatest impact.

Trap 10: No participation of employees in action planning the survey results. Employees want to feel need and appreciated. Plus, employees often have excellent ideas about how best to leverage strengths of an organization and to address its blind-spots. Thus, take advantage of their knowledge and insight when formulating action plans for the survey results.

When implemented well, Employee Opinion or Organizational Climate Surveys are wise, strategic business tools that contribute to your bottom line. They imbue employees with a sense of recognition, value and company 'ownership.' And survey results can guide revisions to business practices so as to enhance efficiency and profitability. The paradox is that investments in tools to enhance organizational culture and functioning seem unnecessary when business is good, and they hardly seem prudent when business is slow. Unfortunately, these mindsets are fatal impediments to enduring business success.

Whatever the size or nature of your organization, the ideal is to move your business from one of 'excellence to significance.' Reaching this goal involves understanding and enacting three key insights about your employees:

Employees are also customers served by your organization.

Employees have a valuable vantage point on the business and workplace culture that management lacks.

Employees have valuable and unique insights into what works and what does not.

Simply stated, talent is the foundation of business success across the service industries. Whether you are administering an Employee Opinion Survey for the first time or are launching an existing survey at regular intervals, take note of these serious but avoidable survey traps. You do not want anything undermining your ability to capture and leverage the wisdom of your employees.

For more information on the best practice 20|20 Employee Opinion Survey(TM) or a free consultation on organizational issues, contact:

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