

Hearts and minds

Capturing the hearts and minds of the people is one of HR's most important functions. Stewart Forsyth says the information gathered must be reliable, valid and manifestly acted on to give any benefit.

Why do staff opinion surveys make a difference? New Zealand and international research indicates that as part of a bundle of staff practices, staff surveys contribute to better organisational performance. To over simplify – it seems surveys make important but subtle issues more tangible, and so more manageable.

Surveys are one of the unique levers that HR (and marketing) people have to demonstrate their understanding of important people issues. After all, what special quality do HR people add to their organisation? Is it recruitment, training and remuneration review? Anyone can do that – maybe not as well, but well enough.

Plugged in

Effective HR includes the ability to help manage organisations and change so that people pitch in and make a positive

difference. I worked for a company that was investing a lot in a rebranding exercise. We did an internal launch of the proposed 'strap line' – the slogan that would sum up our personality and brand values to the market.

I talked to the 'opinion leaders' in each of the business groups after the launch. The reaction to the strap line varied between indifferent and disgusted. We rethought the strap line, and people really liked the new one.

Doing a survey in this case:

- Meant we could quickly change course and head in a more useful direction;
- Demonstrated to a significant group that their buy in was essential;
- And just to make the obvious point, illustrated to this group and to senior management that I had my finger on the pulse - 'Yes Doctor, we'll switch off the life support!'

Positive participation

You do this all the time – you tell your managers how things will play with their people, how to sell change, what not to do. Surveys give you the means to do some of this more precisely. And to demonstrate that you have the knowledge and skills essential for managing people. By using surveys in a strategic way you can get HR issues on your organisation's agenda.

What makes for a good survey? It isn't going to help your cred if the survey fails in these areas:

- Strong participation;
- Taps into key areas;
- Measures what it claims to measure;
- Action oriented.

If your participation level drops below 50%, you've failed. Of course if you were sending your survey outside your organisation, maybe to customers, you would be very happy with a return rate in the 40s. If you are surveying your own people – you should do everything you can to get your response rate into the 70s (see figure 1 for suggestions).

Value chain

Figure 2 shows some of the key dimensions that your survey should be picking up on, and the connections that consistently emerge. This is the value chain that drives performance in your organisation. If you miss out some of these links you are losing valuable information about how to manage your people and your business.

Just to illustrate the impact that these dimensions can have, figure 3 shows the relative impact of different organisational 'drivers' on the profit performance of UK manufacturers:

- Notice which is most important?
- Where would you invest for greater organisational performance? But of course you'd say that!
- Where's the evidence for your organisation?

Measuring dimensions

A trap for those who want to tap into



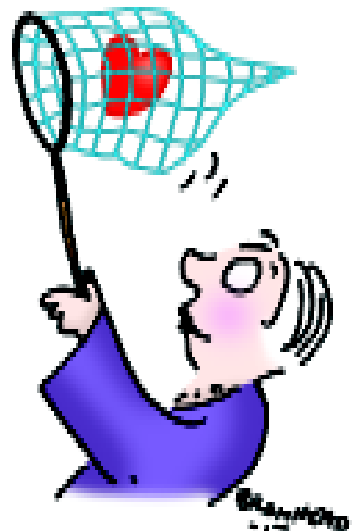
STEWART FORSYTH IS DIRECTOR OF FX CONSULTANTS, SPECIALISTS IN LIFTING PRODUCTIVITY AND PERFORMANCE THROUGH THE CREATIVE USE OF MEASUREMENT AND MOTIVATIONAL SYSTEMS

the important value drivers, from 'supportive leadership' through to 'leaving intention', is the way you measure these dimensions.

- The technical issues here are reliability and validity;
- The practical issue is convincing your managers that your survey measure of 'job satisfaction' is picking up how people feel about the important positive and negative aspects of their job, and not how they felt about lunch the day they did the survey.

HR people will go to a lot of trouble to ensure that the selection tests they use are reliable and valid – after all, we are making important decisions about people here right? Few worry about the same issues when it comes to evaluating the quality of the surveys they are using. But we are making important decisions about the organisation here right?

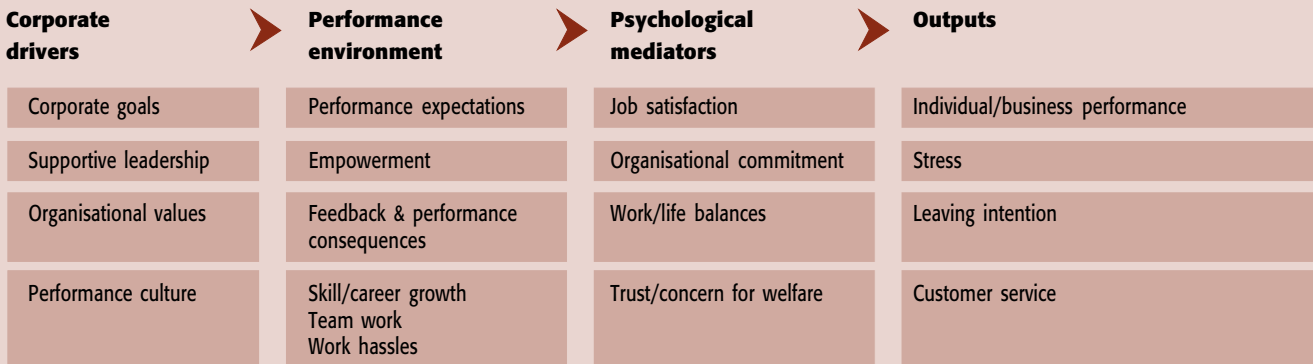
Ask your survey providers for evidence about the integrity of their measures. This issue will assume greater



1. Building high levels of participation

- Consult with managers and staff about the issues and the language used;
- Update the address list so that each person gets an individual appeal (and names and contact details are correct);
- Pre-notify about the survey – individual and general PR;
- Individualise cover letter and survey (if separate);
- Clarify how respondents' help will be useful;
- Clarify how respondents will benefit – 'what's in it for me?';
- Minimise risk of respondents being threatened by survey or use of data;
- Explain confidentiality (and ensure there is good communication from managers about confidentiality);
- Use incentives, preferably attached to the survey itself (eg, a pen);
- Give people time to do it (but don't make it obligatory);
- Try not to exceed 4 pages;
- Have the survey follow a logical format;
- Minimise open ended questions;
- Keep less important, sensitive or demographic questions for the end;
- Include a stamped, pre-addressed return envelope; and/or nominated people to collect (or if online – minimum number of steps to get to the survey questions);
- Send out follow up postcards or letters about 10 days later, emphasising the survey's importance and the need for high response rate (ideally only to non-respondents);
- Feed back team or department response rate to the team during the survey period.

2. Critical components of organisational performance



Adapted from Peter Hart, Insight SRC, Obtaining Value from Employee Opinion Surveys, 2001.
Some examples of these dimensions can be found at www.survey.fxc.co.nz/samplesurvey

3. Organisational drivers

Impact on profitability of UK manufacturers over 10 years (Patterson, 1997, Institute for Personnel and Development)

Driver	Profit impact
Job satisfaction	5%
Organisational commitment	5%
Supervisory support + empowerment + skill development + concern for welfare	10%
Research and development	6%
Strategy	2%
Quality	1%

importance as issues such as work stress become the subject of legal scrutiny.

Ready to roll

The survey isn't done until you've fed the results back to the stakeholders:

- For executives – what this means for the business;
- For managers – what this means for their team;
- For staff – what this means for them;
- Possibly others such as unions, shareholders, community groups or customers.

And then you need to start rolling out the initiatives.

A suggestion – have some ready to roll, so that it's easier for people to make the 'survey leads to action' link. You're sure to find that communication could be improved in some parts of the business. Have a new communication initiative (team brief, notice board posters, an A4 newsletter) ready to roll.

Negative action

A negative illustration of the power of surveys is a follow up survey run for one organisation. There was:

- No improvement in the employ-

ees' concerns;

- No change in the proportion of disgruntled employees from the previous survey.

The HR manager left shortly after.

This illustrates why you must act on the issues identified by the survey (so much so, that if there is an issue you can't act on you should leave it out).

Managerial mastery

Significant goodwill is built up when successive surveys are used to track progress in identified priority areas. A particular organisation identified leadership development as a strategic priority. One of the measures of leadership was included in the staff survey (using a standardised scale). The improvement in leadership ratings:

- Validated the effort put into leadership development;
- Demonstrated to people that their view was the ultimate criterion of leadership effectiveness.

These survey success factors will help you demonstrate your mastery of the levers for managing your people – for their benefit, as well as the benefit of your business. **ET**

Survey

Transforming HR

New Zealand organisations are edging ahead of their Australian counterparts when it comes to transforming their HR function, according to findings released by Mercer Cullen Egan Dell in their 2002 HR Transformation Study.

Senior consultant Stephen Richardson said:

- Results from 33 leading New Zealand organisations and 104 Australian businesses showed 29% of New Zealand HR executives considered the HR transformation process to be completed in their organisation, compared to only 9% in Australia;
- Comparisons to US and UK markets showed New Zealand organisations still have some ground work to make up.

Turnover tales

The findings showed that of the HR executives interviewed:

- 79% of those in New Zealand had been with their organisation for less than 4 years, compared to 52% of those in Australia;
- 31% of those in Australia had been with their organisation for more than 10 years, compared to only 9% of those in New Zealand.

Mr Richardson said this was a general New Zealand trend for senior management and executive positions, not necessarily specific to HR. However, many of the New Zealand HR executives interviewed felt a lack of recognition and support from their senior management teams. This led to feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration in their current roles.

Mercer's 2002 NZ HR transformation study is available for purchase, and costs \$200 plus GST. **ET**