

Collecting Feedback

Some employers are using online surveys to measure employee satisfaction and enhance employee engagement.

By Elizabeth Agnvall

Kolby Ivanhoe, senior human resources specialist at Abilene, Texas-based Hendrick Health System -- which includes a hospital, insurance company and retirement center -- was willing to jump through hoops to get employees excited about the company's web-based employee engagement survey. So not only did Ivanhoe organize an employee talent show to drum up excitement around the survey, he also entered the contest, playing the guitar while the company's director of education sang.

At a kickoff meeting for the survey, employees were asked to vote for their favorite performances and to share ideas for capturing employees' talents.

Although Ivanhoe and his team tried to instill an atmosphere of fun into the survey process, leaders at the 2,600-employee organization consider the work of the survey serious business.

"When your mother or father is lying in a hospital bed, it's very important to have an engaged nurse who is going to make fewer medical errors," Ivanhoe says, bringing the issue to a human level. He says employee surveys can give employers the facts they need to drive employee engagement.

Hendrick Health System's approach to employee surveys is part of a trend throughout the corporate world of capturing employee attitudes and opinions by combining sophisticated technology with the latest in organizational behavior theory.

Going Online

Since a majority of Hendrick Health System's employees don't sit at a computer, the company's IT department set up phone and computer banks for employees to use to take the survey. Each employee got a password to log on to take the survey

in Spanish or English, either through a computer or by phone at any time of day.

Workers took a survey from the Washington, D.C.-based Gallup Organization. The targeted survey's 12 questions were designed to measure employee engagement and link to business outcomes including retention, productivity, profitability, customer engagement and safety.

Gallup translated both telephone and online responses into tailored scorecards that it presented to Hendrick Health System managers during training sessions with 250 leaders over several days.

Allen Kraut, Ph.D., a professor of management at the Baruch College's Zicklin School of Business in New York, and editor of *Getting Action from Organizational Surveys: New Concepts, Technologies, and Applications* (Jossey-Bass, 2006), describes the movement away from paper-based surveys to online instruments as a "sea change."

Companies have good reason for taking surveys online, Kraut says. "The advantages of electronic surveys are enormous, in terms of time and cost savings." Online surveys eliminate the need for postage, shipping and printing, and results can be tabulated quickly. Open-ended questions are keyed in by respondents, and results can be tailored toward specific departments and benchmarked both within and outside of the company. Some newer survey technology allows managers to view results online, run their own ad hoc queries and format the data in ways that are most helpful to them.

When companies first started switching to online surveys, Kraut and his colleagues conducted a number of studies to find out whether offering surveys online influenced their results.

"We found no differences in the way people responded in regards to how many questions they answered or the number of favorable or unfavorable answers," Kraut says. The one exception was that the electronic write-in comments tended to be twice as long.

Kraut says one potential disadvantage with conducting an online survey is that some employees -- especially in companies with low trust levels -- are often concerned about the confidentiality of their answers.

"Many [employees] feel that paper-based surveys

are more anonymous," Kraut says, adding that most HR professionals agree that the advantages of web-based surveys outweigh their disadvantages.

Checking Pulses

Because they design and sell software like Quicken, QuickBooks and TurboTax, employees at Mountain View, Calif.-based Intuit are clearly comfortable using the Internet, so online surveys are an obvious choice for Intuit's workforce. In fact, since the company started doing surveys six years ago, it has never done them any other way.

Eric Hummel, vice president of talent development, says the company does a lot of preparation and follow-up in conducting its annual survey.

Before the annual survey in November, Intuit sends out marketing and branding materials, such as posters and e-mail reminders. The company's human resources IT group extracts employee information from the company's HR data system and sends it to Purchase, N.Y.-based Sirota Survey Intelligence.

Employees receive an e-mail with a password to log on to the survey web site (hosted by Sirota) and answer between 62 and 92 questions in approximately 15 minutes. For a survey last November, Intuit had a 94 percent response rate -- much higher than the industry average of 80 percent.

"We encourage every manager to follow up with their teams to review their results and share the lessons learned from the annual survey," says Phil Warden, Intuit's workforce research senior program manager.

In past years, Intuit published 60 different department-specific PowerPoint presentations on a web site for managers to view, along with a standard PDF report that every manager received. The company is about to start using a new reporting tool that includes both a traditional report and a dynamic query engine. Managers are expected to develop action plans based on results.

Between March and August, Warden and his team offer an anonymous pulse survey to check on the progress of action plans.



Reaching Manufacturing

Using the latest web-based technology to survey companies is relatively easy when employees are Internet-savvy and work at computers. Leveraging such technology in a company with a large manufacturing base can pose a different set of challenges.

Chicago-based aeronautics giant The Boeing Co. has been surveying employees for decades.

John Messman, director of employee relations for Boeing, says the company has used both electronic and paper-based surveys for years, but in the past several years -- because of cost savings and advances in technology -- the organization has pushed employees to take the biannual survey online. Last year, only 10 percent of employees took a paper survey.

The company sets up centers with computer kiosks and also invites employees to sit at supervisors' desks to fill out the survey. Messman says the company's efforts are showing results: This year Boeing had a participation rate of 75 percent, up from 72 percent the previous year.

Messman says his department begins designing survey questions four months before the survey goes online. The survey includes 40 questions asked of all employees plus 10 to 15 questions specific to each employee's business unit. About a month before the survey begins, Boeing's IT department pulls a list of all employees from the company's HR management system.

On off years, the company runs an action survey, sampling 20 percent of employees and asking questions about the survey process, such as "Did managers share results?" and "Are you seeing results based on feedback?" Messman says Boeing uses this short survey as a front-end indicator to help direct organizational planning for the next year.

Previously, managers got a report detailing survey results, but Boeing now works with Lincoln, Neb.-based survey vendor Kenexa to maximize the process. Managers receive an e-mail with a link to survey results that allows them to run ad hoc queries on the data and to link to Kenexa's "best practices" database.

Doing Field Studies

Boeing and Intuit are both large companies with substantial IT and HR departments that allow them to spend time and resources on the survey process, but it's not only large companies that can conduct cutting-edge surveys. Today's technology allows smaller companies -- even those with unplugged employees -- to run sophisticated employee surveys as well.

At family-owned Watsonville, Calif.-based berry grower Driscoll's, with 1,000 employees, including full-time, temporary and seasonal

workers, Director of Training and Development Janet Heien says surveys help the company "grow great people." Although Driscoll's has conducted a few paper surveys, Heien spearheaded an effort in 2002 to move to a web-based survey for the company's 350 full-time employees.

A majority of Driscoll's employees don't sit at computers -- they are spread throughout 20 locations in berry nurseries, fields and distribution centers. Heien worked with survey vendor Innovative HR Solutions LLC, based in Cathedral City, Calif., to set up a web-based survey in English and Spanish and to make computers available to its workforce.

Laptops were placed at nurseries, fields and distribution centers, and the company installed wireless Internet in locations without web access. Driscoll's held \$100 raffles each week for survey respondents during the three-week survey period and assigned facility representatives as go-to people for employees with questions or concerns.

Heien says some employees had never used a computer before, so having a survey representative at every facility was crucial. Questions covered benefits, communication, compensation, employee satisfaction and other areas crucial to business success. In the end, the company had a 91 percent participation rate.

Results were distributed in a newsletter to all employees. Heien met with each company director to present an overview and share results comparing departments.

"We had strong management support and interest in knowing what the results were," Heien says. Today, the survey is considered part of the company's culture. Driscoll's has expanded the survey to include employees in Mexico and Portugal and has translated the survey into Portuguese and Bulgarian, in addition to Spanish.

Overcoming Challenges

Jodi Dupler had her own set of challenges when she began working on developing a companywide survey process at The Shelly Group, a construction company in Thornville, Ohio. The company's 2,200-person workforce is made up of union and nonunion workers. Before conducting the survey, the company's financial analyst worked with the IT department to create an Excel file of 1,044 nonunion employee names. (Under the terms of its labor contract, the company cannot survey union members.)

Innovative HR Solutions sent a list of 235 ques-

tions to those employees that were designed to measure employee engagement in different categories including career opportunities, competitive benefits, effective communication, employee management relations, fair compensation, health and safety, and job satisfaction. Dupler worked with the company's senior vice president and its general counsel to choose 88 statements from the vendor list with which employees could agree or disagree, as well as four open-ended questions.

The company mailed and e-mailed letters telling employees about the survey and asking plant managers to encourage workers to participate. Innovative HR Solutions sent employees log-on codes by e-mail or postcard -- 525 employees received postcards mailed to their homes, which told them where to go online to take the survey, while an additional number received their log-ons via e-mail.

Although Dupler says web-based surveys are easy to administer, a key disadvantage for her company is that some of its field personnel don't use computers. These employees needed to come into an office to take the survey.

In July, Innovative HR Solutions Managing Partner Richard Sherwood, SPHR, presented the survey results, and top leaders at The Shelly Group received a CD-ROM with the data. Dupler is working with managers to create action plans based on those results.

Acting on Results

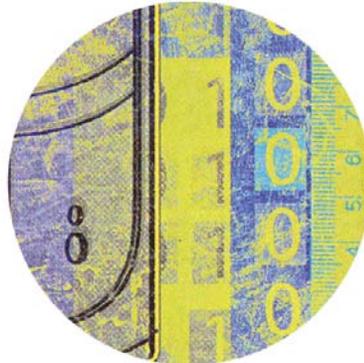
Kraut stresses that even the latest technology won't do a company any good unless it acts on results. He cites one executive who says doing a survey is like pulling the pin on a hand grenade: If you don't do something with it, it may hurt more than it helps.

Kraut recommends that employers don't try to fix everything. Instead, he suggests zeroing in on one or two things that are the most important and acting on them quickly.

He says some companies use technology to post best practices gleaned from the survey on their intranet sites and to provide managers with action planning tools packaged directly with survey results. Kraut says it's crucial that employees see that the time they take to answer questions results in workplace improvements.

"Research makes it very clear that doing the survey and not taking action afterward is actually worse than not doing the survey at all," Kraut says. "Don't ask questions about things you are not prepared to change."

Elizabeth Agnvall is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.



Innovative HR Solutions, LLC

69997 Paloma Del Sur, Casita Suite • Cathedral City, California 92234-4951
Tel: (760) 770-2033 • Fax: (760) 770-2093 • www.innovative-hrsolutions.com

