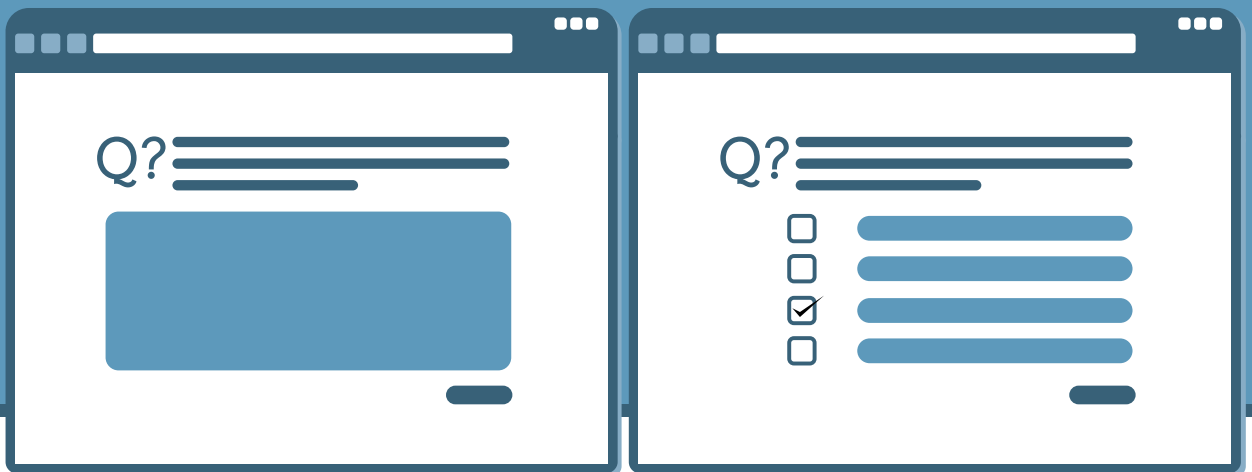


When to Use Open Ended Questions in Your Employee Survey

The Benefits
and Drawbacks



When thinking about conducting an engagement survey, one thing to consider is whether or not to include open-ended items. Open-ended items are questions that ask employees to provide written responses rather than choose from a list or respond to a scale. When considering open-ended items, you need to weigh the relative pros and cons to decide whether they are right for you and your situation.

“... you need to weigh the relative pros and cons to decide..”

The Benefits

- 1 Open-ended items are great for gathering rich and useful information. Often, the responses provide unique and valuable insights that were not anticipated. Open-ended questions may illuminate issues that were not directly addressed in the survey.
- 2 Respondents often like having open-ended questions because it provides them an opportunity to "speak their mind". Open-ended questions allow respondents to feel that they are truly heard.
- 3 Responses to open-ended questions are often very helpful in providing greater context and meaning to the overall survey results – provides greater depth of understanding



The Drawbacks

- 1 One drawback is that open-ended items are more time consuming to complete. Often, respondents don't want to put in the time to provide a truly thoughtful response. People simply do not want to spend a lot of time typing out answers to questions.
- 2 Open-ended questions may provide skewed information. Since many respondents do not want to take the time needed to thoughtfully respond to these questions, the responses you do receive are often more negative since individuals who are unhappy may be more likely to take the time to share their grievances.
- 3 Given that only a portion of respondents will take the time to provide responses, there is a question of how representative these comments are. While the information can be very insightful and useful, it has to be looked at in the greater context. Are a handful of negative responses outweighing the large number of people who chose not to respond or provided only brief positive answers?
- 4 Often, open-ended questions are given too much value. The responses can be very interesting and informative, however, one cannot discount the value of the responses to the other survey questions.

5 Respondents may be hesitant to respond because of concerns regarding confidentiality. Providing detailed responses may provide clues regarding the identity of respondents.

6 A final drawback is the difficulty of analyzing the information once you have it. Reading and categorizing the information gathered from open-ended items can be very time consuming, especially if you have a large number of respondents.



Benefits

- Provides rich, useful information
- Can highlight issues not addressed in the survey
- Allows respondents to feel "fully heard"
- Responses can provide context and meaning to survey results



Drawbacks

- Time consuming to complete
- Tend to skew negative
- Given too much weight or value
- Concerns regarding confidentiality
- Time consuming to analyze and identify trends



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