

WHEN TO USE CONTINUOUS “PULSE” SURVEYS



When to use continuous “pulse” surveys

A recent trend in organizations has been the use of continuous surveys. The surveys are called continuous because rather than following the traditional model of a large survey administered to employees at one time, continuous surveys are short, often-time only one-item surveys administered on a regular basis, often weekly. The allure of this approach is the ability to gather real-time information about employee attitudes on a frequent basis. However, there are some things to consider that may make one reconsider the usefulness of this approach.



Pros:

- Short in length, and therefore, easy for employees to complete.
- Administered frequently.
- Provide real-time, recurring information to managers that may indicate changes in attitudes.
- Signal to employees that management is interested in their perspectives

Cons:

- Ambiguity regarding what results indicate - are differences week to week due to different people responding or to actual changes that are occurring in the organization?
- Short number of questions limits the information that can be gathered. Therefore, there is little or no information to indicate why changes in attitudes have occurred.
- Does not provide information regarding areas to target for action. It is worse to ask employees how they feel if there is no plan to act upon the results
- Concerns over survey fatigue – employees often feel like there are already too many surveys they are asked to complete. Being asked to complete the survey (albeit a short one) on a regular basis may soon lose its allure.
- Manager overload – managers have a variety of demands. Uncertainty regarding the meaning of results and how to respond places more on their plate

Pulse surveys sound good in theory but it's the execution where it gets tripped up.

First of all, how do you ensure that the people responding that day are "representative" of the whole company? With smaller numbers responding you have the potential problem of having a sample of respondents that is overly represented by a certain group (for example corporate employees) while the next survey could have a higher percentage of line employees. If the results go up or down significantly how will you know if the changes are due to the people surveyed or because of actual changes going on in the organization?

Are respondents allowed to answer at will or do you need to manage invitations on a rolling basis? If at will, you will likely get people when they have a specific concern or issue that may not be indicative of their more typical attitudes. If on a rolling basis,

making sure that you are surveying a representative group would require significant work to draw appropriate samples.

How often would you survey people? With companies of only a few hundred or even a couple thousand employees you would likely have to ask people to respond quite often. People already suffer from survey fatigue and this would seem to compound it.

Your engagement initiative would lose it's sense of being an event - a time where the company focuses efforts and is willing to hear what employees have to say.

In the end, continuous "pulse" surveys might tell you if one of your individual employees had a bad week, but won't do anything to show you the larger engagement issues affecting the company, and won't provide you with any insight into how to take action.



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