



EMPLOYEES TAKE SURVEYS TO SEE RESULTS, NOT BECAUSE THEY LOVE SURVEYS

Study Dives into Employees' Expectations of Surveys

OVERVIEW

The annual employee survey is under fire because leaders think it doesn't work well and leaders don't see much value in it. There is a big push for more surveying or "continuous listening"—meaning that organizations should be surveying their people all the time—or at least very often. The idea is that continuous listening will provide leaders up-to-date information to relay to employees and managers, implement action, and create change in the organization. Seems great but before organizations decide to implement this strategy (and follow a potentially baseless fad), they should first seek out evidence to understand its value.

The most basic question is, "Do employees want to take more frequent surveys?" And, since employees are the "customer" of the survey process, it also makes sense to gather feedback from them regarding the current process. To answer these questions and others, SMD conducted a study, commissioning a third party

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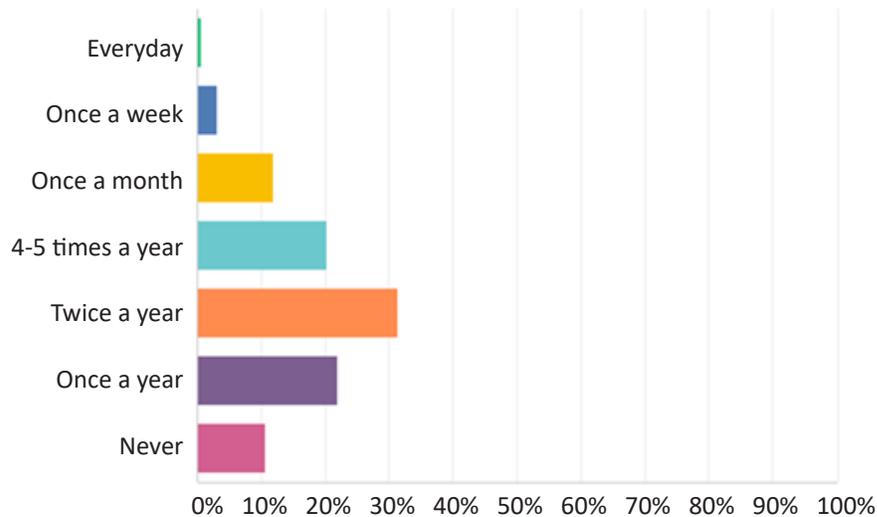


to gain access to U.S.-based employees across industries (more than 700 frontline employees responded). SMD decided to use a third party for the sample to ensure no affiliation with their clients (the employees of their clients could have a skewed opinion – of course they assume they would skew in a positive manner – and may have not represented the market in general). This white paper is a summary of the findings.

SURVEY FREQUENCY

SMD started by asking employees their preferences regarding the frequency of surveys. When directly asked about preferred frequency of surveying, the study found that more than 86 percent wouldn't want to be surveyed any more than 4–5 times a year. The most preferred frequency of surveying was **twice** a year. SMD found this result interesting but not shocking. Have you ever heard employees clamoring to take more surveys? Probably not.

How often would you like your employer to ask your opinion through a survey?

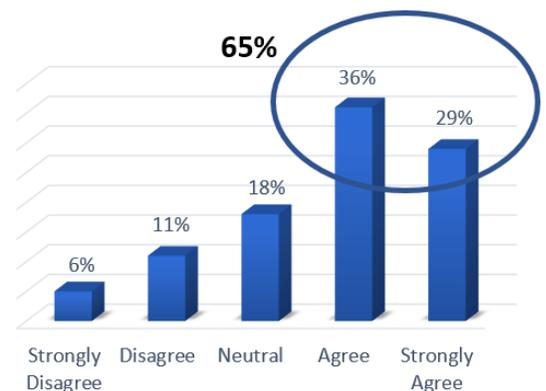


SURVEY RESULTS

The next set of questions gathered feedback from employees regarding their current survey process. The purpose of these questions was to understand from employees how their current process was working and identify potential areas for improvement. Obviously, employees aren't asking for more surveys, so it's important to understand other potential ways to improve the survey process.

When employees complete surveys, they expect to hear about the survey results. Seems reasonable. They spent time expressing their opinions and sharing what they like and dislike. Additionally, the organization spent time and money to develop and administer the survey, so you'd think the organization valued the employees' opinions and would share that information back. SMD asked employees about their expectations and what actually occurred regarding the sharing of survey results. SMD found 65 percent of employees expect to hear about the survey results, but only 46 percent of them were actually made aware of the results.

After participating in an employee survey, I expect to hear about the survey results from my manager or organization.



Furthermore, of the 46 percent that were made aware of the results, 38 percent only saw the results at the company level and 19 percent at the department level. So even if the results were shared, it often wasn't localized and was likely very difficult for the employee to take away anything applicable to the employee's team. Sharing results with the employee is the bare minimum when it comes to survey follow-up. We're not talking about creating or implementing action plans, executing organizational initiatives, or gathering follow-up information – just sharing the results. If employees aren't provided with results from an annual survey, what makes them likely to participate in weekly or monthly surveys? If leaders aren't properly executing one survey a year, why should we expect leaders to execute 12 surveys a year?

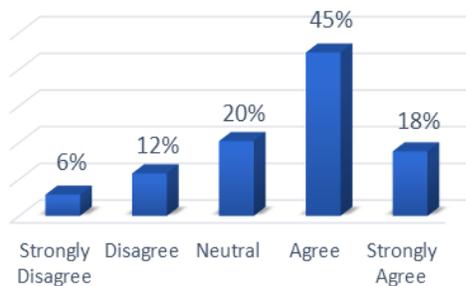
After your last employee survey, were you made aware of the results of the survey?



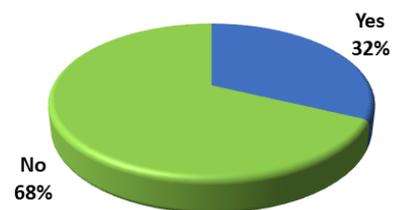
CHANGES POST-SURVEY

Let's take the survey follow-up one step further. If leaders did share the survey results to employees (again, the bare minimum), how often did leaders make changes based on the survey to improve survey scores, or more importantly improve the experience of the employees? Again, if an employee spends time telling their employer what is going well or poorly (i.e., filling out the survey), you would think that employer would value that feedback and make changes to improve the employee experience. Of the survey respondents, 63 percent expected to see changes based on the survey, but only 32 percent actually saw changes within their organizations.

I expect to see changes based on the employee survey.

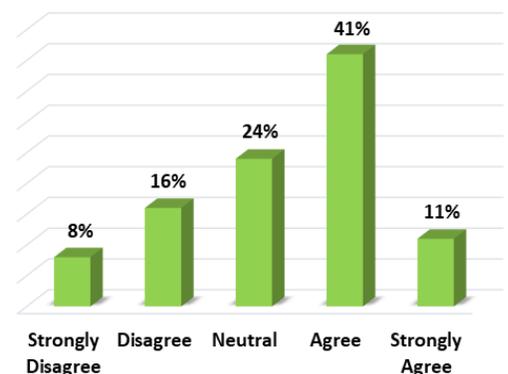


After your last employee survey, did you see changes made in your team or organization based on the survey?



If organizational leaders are not effectively implementing changes once a year after an annual survey, how can you expect changes to occur weekly or monthly? HR leaders have a hard enough time getting leaders to work on an annual survey. The lack of action obviously doesn't lead to change, can devalue the purpose of gathering feedback, and deteriorates the trust of the employees. The study found that only 52 percent of front-line employees felt their organizations valued their feedback.

I believe my organization values the feedback I provide through the employee survey.



Administering an employee survey to improve the organization and the experience of the employees, if not done correctly, can actually hurt the employee experience. In reality, surveying your workforce constantly is difficult to do effectively because of all that goes into surveying (planning, communicating, surveying, rolling out results, discussing results, and taking action on results). Plus, if you are going to solicit the opinions of your employees, then you **MUST** get back to them on what the results were and what you are going to do about it. Just doing a pulse to see if a score is moving will make employees less likely to take the next survey. SMD has found that clients perform best on business outcomes and survey results when they survey annually and in alignment with their fiscal year so that the survey becomes a business process and not an outlier event. A check-in pulse survey or two throughout the year is useful but only if it is going to be used strategically.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Just because leaders and data scientists want more data does not mean that they should abuse, and in many cases, break trust with employees by listening without acting. Imagine the frustration of front-line employees who are asked to take surveys all the time with little to no expectation of anything happening because of it. If just listening to employees, but not creating change or improvement is the goal, then you should send employees a survey every hour of every day. The technology and capability to do that exists, but what's the point? Again, it's critical to survey with a purpose and goal. Otherwise, measuring employee attitudes constantly is a waste. Remember – measurement is not the desired result.

“... an important point to remember is that by conducting a survey, we are entering into a social contract where expectations are generated on the part of the employees that management cares about their issues and is willing to do something about them.”
-A. Church & D. Oliver, *The Importance of Taking Action, Not just Sharing Survey Feedback*. In *Getting Action from Organizational Surveys*. (2006)

It's important to not lose sight of the employees in a drive to gather their feedback – which may seem contradictory but happens more than we may want to admit. Organizations are scrambling to gather feedback but may leave the employee perspective out of the process. Based on this research, it was found that only **51 percent** of front-line employees would complete a once-a-week, 1-5 item survey at least 60 percent of the time. Twenty percent of front-line employees wouldn't even complete the once a week survey more than **20 percent** of the time. Thus, it seems clear that surveying too frequently provides little to no business value, annoys employees, and yields poor data quality through lowered participation. Instead, organizations should focus on maximizing the information they are likely already collecting.

WAYS TO BREAK THE CYCLE

So with only one or two surveys a year, how can HR improve the sharing of results and action planning process? Employees are what drive the survey process. They are the individuals who are taking the time out of their days to complete the survey and provide their feedback to the organization, but their involvement in the process almost always stops there. Should that change?

Managers have long been the owners of the action-planning process (find action-planning best practices here and here). Action planning, when implemented correctly, can be extremely powerful; however, it is often either not done at all by leaders, or leaders do a poor job communicating what has been done. Creating and implementing an impactful action plan requires a lot of effort and it's

important to remember: front-line leaders are very busy and have multiple competing priorities at any given time.

These few principles will serve HR well:

1. Share results to all employees and make them specific to their teams
2. Don't over-survey just to gather information you cannot realistically take action on
3. Include employees in the action planning process
4. Demonstrate you value the time and feedback given by your employees by sharing the final actions taken on what you heard

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that employees don't want to take more surveys, they simply want organizations to do more with the feedback that is already provided. Instead of focusing on the frequency of measurement, organizations should look to improve the communication and action-planning processes. Simply surveying more frequently will likely further frustrate employees as it will make the action planning process even more difficult. In fact, SMD only recommends surveying more often when organizations execute the entire process well. The focus for improvement and innovation needs to be on the backend of the survey process – not on the collection of more data!

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