

# Original insight



## Mastering questionnaire design in employee surveys

Employee engagement remains at the top of the business agenda, but many companies are using poorly-designed or unsuitable surveys. Taking a bespoke approach will help you add real business value. Designing a questionnaire that is aligned to business objectives, and measures key drivers of engagement, will give data that can genuinely be turned into actions.

## Executive summary

**“The way employee engagement operates can take many forms ... and the best models are those which have been custom-developed for the institution”**

Engaging for success

Up to two thirds of companies in the UK run an employee survey and the number continues to rise<sup>1</sup>. The problem is that many are getting little or no value from the survey process.

We suggest that the only way to measure engagement accurately is through a bespoke employee survey. This will recognise the unique organisational context and business objectives. It will allow companies to garner more valuable results that can then be used to inform strategy and drive business improvement.

Too many companies are using ineffective surveys that have poorly-designed questionnaires or a lack of alignment with business strategy.

In this paper we show how to set up a bespoke employee survey programme and align it to business objectives and strategy. We explain how to gather the organisational context through internal research and how to design an effective, relevant questionnaire and create an engagement index.

What drives engagement is unique to each organisation. This, in itself, offers a strong argument for creating a bespoke employee survey. David MacLeod, the government's advisor on employee engagement and co-author of the 'Engaging for success' report, says:

“The way employee engagement operates can take many forms... and the best models are those which have been custom-developed for the institution.”<sup>2</sup>

A bespoke approach will help you to measure the things that will make your employees more loyal, innovative and hardworking. Aligning survey questions with business objectives will also mean you get answers to the most strategically important business questions and will ensure actions don't fall off the agenda.

Using standard question sets won't provide you with an accurate measure of engagement; nor will sticking with exactly the same survey questions over many years as the business agenda and objectives tend to move on. So if you're investing money in an employee survey but not getting value from the process, please read on.

# 1. Designing the survey questionnaire

For tips on taking action on survey results, see our original insight paper called 'How to maximise survey success through action planning'. Download it [here](#).

Designing a bespoke questionnaire is fundamental to the success of any employee survey because it ensures that the right things are being measured.

There are a few guiding principles in the design of a survey questionnaire:

- Make it quick and easy for all employees to understand and complete
- Ensure it is interesting and relevant to all
- Measure the issues that are important to both the organisation and employees
- Make it visually appealing – possibly with its own brand identity that can be used for all engagement materials
- Only include actionable questions.

## Questionnaire frameworks

A fundamental consideration when designing a new employee survey is to ensure it links with business strategy. A number of companies we work with achieve this by asking us to design their survey questionnaire framework based on their corporate strategy. The survey process then delivers the strategy of values and results clearly show how successful this has been.

### Client case study 1

We work with a large business software client and used their corporate strategy, alongside the output from employee focus groups, to inform the questionnaire design. This approach ensured that the questionnaire included issues that were important to employees and enabled the company to check how elements of the strategy worked in practice.

The company was keen to use survey data to evaluate how well embedded the strategy was. We were able to map visually the survey questions to the strategy and show the leadership board where they needed to target efforts to reinforce the strategy.

### Client case study 2

A global security firm wanted to base its survey questionnaire on the corporate values, which are derived from the people strategy. We designed a questionnaire which featured three questions mapped against each of the company's five values. This has enabled them to get a clear view of which values are being lived in the view of employees and where to take action. This also really helps to embed their values in the organisation.

## Out with the old survey, in with the new?

Before starting a new survey, check whether any of the questions from an existing survey should be retained and revised or whether any of to start from scratch.

We recommend [qualitative](#) and [statistical](#) reviews on previous surveys to find any questions that should be retained in light of the current business context and survey objectives.

A [qualitative review](#) is used if a company has a current survey that is out of date or there is a desire to incorporate activities such as organisational change or capture elements of a new strategy. It allows us to make sure that questions follow best practice in using consistent wording. This approach works well when launching a new strategy or values to ensure the survey aligns to these.

A [statistical review](#) helps you make the most effective questionnaire design decisions. It does this by identifying:

- Redundant questions that have – for example – continually achieved high scores but had little variance in the results. These can safely be deleted
- Overlapping questions – for example questions that are highly related and measure the same thing. These can also be deleted without reducing the effectiveness of the survey.

Carrying out a statistical review is particularly useful for questionnaires that have run for several years and need refreshing to ensure continued relevance and value. It can also help companies cut down survey length, which can increase response rates.

## Rating scales

Rating scales allow employees to express both the direction and strength of their opinion. We commonly use both 4-point and 5-point Likert scale. In deciding which is best for your company, weigh up things like your views on 'central tendency' (people choosing the middle option), whether easy-to-analyse (4-point) data is desired or if you want to incorporate neutral responses. There are pros and cons for each scale and ultimately it depends on the culture of the company and what they have used previously for other surveys. If a rating scale has been used successfully before, it is best to stick with it.

## Question types

Aim to strike a balance between questions specific to a company and questions that can be benchmarked against other companies. If a previous survey question has been used to track a particular issue (or for action planning), the same wording should be retained to measure improvements over time. However, it is possible to tweak the wording of questions as you evolve your survey to align it with strategy and still be able to use it for benchmarking.

We recommend using at least one open-ended question in a questionnaire to gather qualitative data. Verbatim comments can provide really useful insights around what the company is doing well or where it needs to improve.

Learn more about using benchmark data in our original insight paper called 'Go compare: The role of employee survey benchmark data'. Download it [here](#).

You must also consider whether any questions are mandatory. While there is a tendency to force responses to get a full data set, we suggest including a 'don't know' or 'N/A' option (whether using a 4 or 5 point scale) so as not to force opinions on questions that may not be relevant to all employees (see figure 1). Alternatively, you can simply suggest employees leave questions blank if not relevant.

Figure 1

<b>BrandZ</b>								<b>ets</b> inspire brilliance	
<b>Employee Engagement Survey</b>									
<b>Leadership</b>									
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know/Not Applicable			
1	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			Clear
2	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			Clear
3	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			Clear
4	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			Clear
					Yes	No	Choose not to respond		
5	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			Clear
<b>Communication</b>									
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know/Not Applicable			
6	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			Clear
7	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			Clear
					Yes	No	Choose not to respond		
8	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			Clear
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know/Not Applicable			
9	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			Clear
10	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			Clear

## 2. Creating a bespoke employee engagement index

**The role of the survey is to uncover what drives employees to connect mentally and emotionally with their employer.**

Academic research, and our experience, show that what employees think about a company will influence how they feel about it, which drives their behaviour. We call this the 'Think, Feel, Do' model (shown below in figure 2). For example, someone who thinks they have an important role will feel their work is valued, which will lead them to put more of themselves into their work.

The role of the survey is to uncover what drives employees to connect mentally and emotionally with their employer. Strengthening this connection will lead to more of the motivation, commitment, positivity and innovation that will ultimately deliver a competitive advantage.

We recognise that each organisation needs its own engagement index since the emotional and intellectual drivers of engagement are so different. Every company has a unique culture and context with employees in diverse configurations of skills, demographics and so on.

### Think, Feel, Do model

Figure 2



The 'Think, Feel, Do' framework that we use to create an engagement index recognises that an employee's perceptions of their organisation – for example their understanding of individual contribution to the strategic direction, job fit, perceptions of the manager (what they **think**) – will determine how they **feel** about working for the company.

Exactly what engaged employees feel will differ between organisations. For example; pride, passion and a sense of belonging are frequently experienced by engaged employees (what they **feel**). But many qualities of an engaged employee are unique to an organisation and its business context. And what an employee feels will drive their behaviour (what they **do**).

### 3. Context gathering – what does engagement look like in your organisation?

Before designing or implementing anything, you must first have a clear picture of what engagement looks like in your organisation. This means carrying out internal, organisational research.

#### Focus groups

Keep in mind that employee engagement is a two-way relationship. Focus groups can ensure that the survey answers questions that employees perceive as important. Employees may choose not to answer a survey that is seen as a management investigation which ignores employee priorities. So ask the question; what do employees hope to achieve from the project? It is also a useful exercise to picture an engaged employee in your organisation and consider; what behaviours mark them out as being engaged?

Focus groups are typically favoured by companies that are new to engagement or have previously had a poor user experience with surveys, which has resulted in cynicism amongst employees. The employee perspective is valuable and focus groups provide a rich source of information to define engagement in your organisation's unique context.

#### Client case study 3

**We work with a large business software company and took a 'bottom-up' approach to gathering survey context. This meant carrying out facilitated employee focus groups to inform the redesign of the questionnaire. From this we made changes to the questionnaire to reflect the greater buy-in and a validation of the engagement index. By running sessions across different sites, we were confident that all employee groups were represented and we added some site-specific questions.**

#### Stakeholder interviews

We typically carry out stakeholder interviews with senior managers when undertaking a new survey programme to understand business issues and priorities. But it is also important to choose employees at other levels and in a variety of departments or locations. This will ensure the employee population is adequately represented.

You can gain an in-depth knowledge of business challenges employees face and explore with them how survey data could assist in addressing those issues. The interviews also play an important role in gaining buy-in to the survey and to taking follow-up action and for sharing ownership of employee engagement so that is not just viewed as an HR initiative.

## 4. Next steps

This paper will hopefully have given you some useful information to apply if you are planning to implement a new or improved employee survey this year. Below we've outlined key actions to keep in mind when devising your survey programme:

- Have a clear understanding of how an engaged employee in your company thinks, feels and acts. Research this thoroughly as it will have a bearing on everything else
- Create an engagement index that measures engagement as it relates to your company
- Ensure the survey questions are aligned to the business strategy so that the survey delivers business-relevant information that managers will use to take meaningful action on results.

We would be delighted to hear from you if you have any questions on this paper or would like the help of our ETS business psychologists with any aspect of your survey.

## About ETS

ETS has implemented bespoke employee survey programmes for organisations of varying sizes including Ageas, G4S, ITV, Sage and Thomas Cook. We provide business-focused consultancy and custom-designed technology to meet the performance management, employee research and 360-degree feedback needs of leading companies.

ETS delivers our clients' 'ideal world', which means that our solutions exactly match each client's corporate culture and processes: we listen to your needs; we do not expect you to bend to our solutions. We can develop the new processes needed to meet your people objectives and, where possible, we can integrate with, and automate, existing HR processes so that new and old work together.

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