



Introduction

Many organisations, including local authorities, now conduct employee research to help explore and understand the attitudes and opinions of their employees. They recognise the value of a happy and engaged workforce (employees are perhaps the most powerful ambassadors an organisation can have) and they want their employees to have a say in where improvements need to be made. The bottom line is that satisfied employees lead to a better quality service and more satisfied customers.

There are clear linkages between employee research and internal communications so it is important that these processes go hand in hand rather than being viewed in isolation. Good communication, both beforehand and afterwards, is essential to effective employee research. Similarly, demonstrating to employees that we want to listen to them and that their views are important can be a valuable communication tool in itself.

What is employee research?

The Market Research Society defines employee research as “any formalised activity developed to gather information about the opinions and behaviours of employees”. This covers the full range of different research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, and might include focus groups, in-depth interviews, panel research, questionnaire surveys or on-line methods.

When might I need to undertake employee research?

Employee research can be undertaken for a variety of reasons and at different stages within an employee's career. Some of the more common types of employee research include:

- **Employee opinion surveys** – to examine employee attitudes towards different aspects of their working life, to measure overall levels of employee satisfaction and engagement (do they intend to stay, are they proud to work for an employer, would they recommend an employer, etc)
- **Joiners' surveys** – to explore the views of new starters, look at their initial impressions of the job, evaluate their experiences of the induction process.
- **Leavers' surveys** – to find out why employees leave the organisation and identify what might have prevented them leaving.
- **Employee discussion groups** – to explore opinions in greater depth, generate ideas or evaluate concepts. Discussion groups are often used to assist with questionnaire design prior to a survey or to help inform action planning afterwards.
- **Employee in-depth interviews** – to research sensitive or personal subject areas (for example stress or bullying) or to speak to more senior respondents who may be difficult to get hold of.
- **Peer sessions** (where an employee nominates one or two close colleagues to participate in a discussion) – to enable in-depth exploration of issues in an environment that might be seen as less 'intimidating' than a one-to-one or a larger group of previously unknown employees.
- **Employer brand research** – to explore how employees (and potential employees) perceive an organisation's reputation as an employer and how this compares with others.



Key principles of employee research

Employee research should normally be carried out in line with the following principles:

Transparency

Employees must understand the purpose of collecting the data and how it will be used. Relevant information such as the subject matter, the length of a discussion group/ interview or the name of any research agency involved should also be clearly communicated to be respondents at the outset.

Consent

Employees must give their consent to data being collected and have the opportunity to opt out of the research at any time. They must not be unduly pressurised to participate in any piece of research. They must also give their informed consent to any recording of an interview or discussion group.

Confidentiality

Employees should be reassured of the confidentiality of anything they write on a questionnaire or say during a discussion.

Anonymity

Employees' anonymity must always be preserved unless they have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on. This includes ensuring that respondents cannot be identified by the content of any verbatim comments used in reports. If there is a risk of employees being identified as a result of sampling a small specialised area they must be informed of this risk and given the opportunity to withdraw.

Data protection

All personal employee data (i.e. any information relating to an identifiable person) is covered by the Data Protection Act 1998. In short, this means that (a) personal data must only be used in the manner described to the respondent at the time of data collection; (b) that permission must be sought to transfer personal data to a third party; and (c) that respondents must not be identified if confidentiality has been promised.

Feeding back the results

As with all research, feeding back the results to participants is an essential stage in the process. Arguably, this is even more critical with employee research since respondents are being drawn from a relatively small universe and the relationship is a particularly important one given the significant amount of time that people spend at work. Keeping people informed helps to build trust and if employees do not hear about the findings or are not told how the information they provided is being used, they may become cynical about any future research and be put off taking part.

Some do's and don'ts...

- **do** remind employees when and how the research was conducted (and why!)
- **do** be honest about the findings....**don't** try and hide 'bad' results, but do let employees know what you intend to do about them
- **don't** report any results for sub-groups of less than ten respondents
- **do** check that any verbatim comments won't inadvertently identify people
- **do** think about who your audience is - posters, executive summaries, presentations as well as online via [Involve](#) might be suitable for feeding back to different audiences



Employee research at Kirklees

The employee research undertaken by Kirklees Council ranges from large scale quantitative projects such as the 2010 employee survey to smaller qualitative projects such as Employee Networks research. Some council services also undertake internal 'customer satisfaction' surveys, where employees are asked for feedback on the service provided to them.

Further information on employee research projects conducted by or on behalf of Kirklees Council is available on the Involve, our engagement planning tool – see <http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/involve/>. Current projects will show on the calendar, or you can use the advanced search to find all projects involving employees.

Further source of information on employee research

- Market Research Society (February 2012) [Guidelines for Employee Research](#)

What next?

If you would like to know more about this topic or any other aspect of research or consultation, please contact us:

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