

# Tough times – but employee research still has value for organisations

In tough times: change, downsizing, competition the thought of research among staff may get the reaction “what’s the point?”

That is even if a questionnaire does appear – senior management may well query whether the investment in such research is worthwhile. Their eyes are on the global factors affecting the business and, foreseeing the negative reactions of their people and the difficulty in responding, could echo the same response: “what’s the point?”

And it is probably true that just asking them how they “feel”, what do they” think” or “want” in a traditional employee survey can be pointless. The very job related aspects where they would like improvements may be impossible for their organisation to achieve. Reality out there is harsh, bringing uncertainty and gloom: the world has changed.

In line with this fundamental change, research among employees also needs to evolve and adapt. Their motivation, engagement and enthusiasm are still integral to business success as many studies have shown. So how can you, as communicators, help bring about the necessary changes to develop internal research so it continues to play an integral role in the business?

**Fit for purpose:** is dependence on tracking and normative questions preventing the questionnaire responding to current business needs? Monitoring progress and gaining perspective through comparison with similar firms is of value - but not at the cost of relevant, productive issues that can help move the organisation through these difficult times.

The first fundamental question is whether your people really understand the current business environment which impacts on their business. There is much general information in the outside media but when decisions which affect them are taken, do they appreciate the commercial imperatives faced by senior management?

If questions ascertaining the level of business knowledge reveal a lack of wider understanding, then a clear action point would suggest that you introduce a communication campaign to raise market awareness

Think about areas where action is possible to create and maintain engagement. The Blessing White Employee Engagement Report 2011 identifies as consistent global keys: employees’ opportunity to apply their talents, career development and training. These – together with the closely related performance feedback – may have merited a couple of questions in the past but could be explored in much greater depth. These opportunities are often the responsibility of line managers so here is useful feedback to them on how they are performing and where they could put stronger emphasis.

These are just two examples – issues in any existing research programmes may still be relevant, but challenge yourself with each single one to gauge if it is paying its way in your investment.

**Digging in the data:** is there more information that can be gained from the research data? Key driver analysis which looks at the relationship between all the factors to identify the most important is just one way to gain further value from your research results.

Be inventive in looking for other ways to find potential action points. Again, just one example which relates to the increasingly vital area of trust. Kevin Murray's new book *The Language of Leaders* notes that the two key themes for CEO's are communication and trust. If you are not already asking about trust in your organization, this is an essential for inclusion.

But if that trust level is low how can you improve it? Many questionnaires ask about the most frequently used communication media -and then which are preferred. However, preference does not always show which is most effective or trustworthy.

If you look at those showing both the strongest and weakest trust against actual usage of information sources this will reveal the ones most popular with the most trusting people. These are the very sources you need to invest in for the future. Equally, the cynical with low trust levels are likely to be more dependent on the rumour and the grapevine, showing the worth of official channels.

Another aspect of trust during uncertain times relates to reassurances of personal anonymity. There is always a degree of concern that people's responses will be identified individually. This is likely to be much stronger when threats of redundancy are in the air: perhaps the "trouble makers" will be the first to go. This makes it all the more important to emphasise that this is not the purpose of the research which should be seen as objective and independent.

**Talk not tick:** could focus group discussions be more productive? Both quantitative and qualitative approaches have their pros and cons. In difficult times, face to face discussions can be more productive for sensitive issues. In practical terms, setting up and facilitating such discussions involve fewer people and gives opportunities to follow up comments to understand the reasons behind opinions. It is also easier to ask for practical examples such as actual behaviours, both positive and negative.

Questionnaires may give the opportunity of responding to open questions but this does not replace the prompts and encouragement of the focus group facilitator to explain comments to gain further insights and suggestions for improvements.

**Think the unthinkable:** are there "no go" areas that should now be considered? Workforce reductions may be inevitable – do people feel they would be treated fairly in such circumstances? Direct questions such as these tend to be avoided by management but will be very much in the minds of employees. Redundancies due to branch closures in one organization had a negative impact on people's views of their organisation. However, a conversation with its HR director told me of an extensive programme of support and assistance for those leaving. When asked whether this had been communicated to employees generally, I was met with an amazed negative: this was seen as "bad news" – but telling people that their colleagues had been treated with concern and respect would have reassured them.

Research analysis may look at employees by age, gender and other demographics. However there is usually no way to distinguish those the organisation is keen to retain from those it does not. Even during challenging times, top talent is valued and sought – and these are the very people who will find it easier to move elsewhere. Could there be ways within your own organisation of distinguishing this key group?

Perhaps by asking about their appraisal marks and analyzing the reactions of those with a 4/5 as the people the organisation most wants to retain. That may seem a controversial approach but the very information that senior management often say they would most like.

Finally, remember that the very act of listening to employees can be positive.

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