Surveying the scene

Asking the question isn’t enough, says Simon Woolley. The true benefit of workplace surveys comes when employee feedback is translated into effective action plans that achieve traction across the organisation.
One of the greatest of Greek philosophers, Aristotle, put a huge emphasis on the power of self-knowledge proclaiming that ‘knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom’. In terms of company improvement, this sentiment is most certainly true and can make a difference to the bottom line.

Understanding an organisation’s strengths and weaknesses is the key to eliminating weak spots. For decades, companies have been formally surveying their employees in a bid to ‘know themselves better’. However, motivations are varied and many go the wrong way about it.

Since the late 90s, companies have been measuring employee engagement to look for a competitive advantage. Studies have shown that disengaged employees stop businesses from performing at their best. Hay Group research shows that companies in the top quartile for both engagement and enablement achieve revenue growth 4.5 times greater than their industry peers.

Employee workplace surveys help business leaders find out what is preventing people doing their jobs. In addition, workplace surveys assist in indicating precisely where changes need to be made in order to have the biggest impact on individual and business performance.

Ultimately, understanding what motivates and enables people to give their best leads to better decision making and planning, wiser investments and deeper customer loyalty.

It’s no surprise then that today most organisations use employee surveys to measure employee engagement. Due to the popularity of workplace surveys and acceptance of engagement as a key metric, we can say you will be at a competitive disadvantage if you do not carry out such surveys.

**True benefits in meaningful action**

Yet asking the question isn’t enough, and it is no longer sufficient to purely win employees’ hearts and minds. The true benefits come when employee feedback is translated into meaningful action, with organisations enabling their workers to do their best in the right role and with the tools and training they need.

There is a wide range of intentions why organisations carry out workplace surveys. Often the overall purpose of running a survey is to identify strengths and weaknesses in an organisation that are affecting business performance. Sometimes there is a particular issue in an organisation that the senior management team is interested in finding out more about.

Organisations are also keen to benchmark themselves against their peers, or identify or recognise star managers or top performers internally. They may also be looking to use a survey as a talent attraction activity.

Many organisations use workplace surveys for the purpose of talent retention. Employees often wonder whether the ‘grass is greener on the other side’, but surveys that show that a company is a great place to work can help remind people that they are working for a top employer and to consider any moves carefully. In addition, turnover can be reduced through increased employee enablement following workplace surveys, with a recent study finding that organisations that engaged and enabled employees had a total reduction in voluntary turnover of 54 percent.

Companies are increasingly surveying for compliance reasons too, using figures on engagement and satisfaction to boost their annual general reports. Surveys are also frequently used to address diversity issues, allowing companies to report on levels of gender and ethnicity equality.

No matter the motivation, workplace surveys conducted in the right way will have substantial benefits. Happier employees will lead to positive organisational outcomes, such as greater customer satisfaction, better employee retention and improved financial performance.

Extensive research conducted by Hay Group confirms that employees who are both engaged (willing to go the extra mile) and enabled (supported to succeed) consistently deliver superior levels of performance; they become effective employees. The research has identified the key drivers that predict how effective employees are in an organisation, so surveying employees and analysing their information can provide insight into the actions leaders need to take to improve performance. Thus, workplace surveys provide an opportunity to place employee feedback and dialogue at the heart of the successful execution of organisational plans and objectives.

**So what makes a good survey?**

Drawing on around 25 years of experience, Hay Group has identified best practice for each stage of the employee survey process, from how to plan the approach and create communications that make an impact, to analysing the results and communicating the findings and taking action after the survey.

It needs to be understood though that organisations are all different and a ‘one size fits all’ survey may not always answer all the questions an organisation may have as it seeks to leverage better engagement and enablement levels. Carefully crafted questions are crucial to a really effective workplace survey. Do not ask a question unless you can take action on it,
Carefully crafted questions are crucial to a really effective workplace survey. Do not ask a question unless you can take action on it, and focus on the two or three issues that will make a real difference.

and focus on the two or three issues that will make a real difference. For example, it would not be very beneficial to an organisation to discover that people are dissatisfied with a certain brand of coffee in the company café—but rather to uncover the issues that really will make a difference to the organisation, such as how effectively the organisation is structured or how challenged employees are in their work.

If the survey is conducted in a unionised environment it is important to involve the union upfront. Unions will generally be very happy to be involved if the survey is being conducted in order to improve employee satisfaction. Another good tip which consistently improves response rates is to stress that the survey is purely voluntary. Surprisingly, when employees are told it is mandatory, response rates invariably drop.

**Communication is key**

Communication throughout all stages of a survey is of utmost importance. In order to secure a high volume of honest employee feedback, employees need to feel supported and comfortable with the process. Good communication will lead to much higher completion rates and more honest feedback. This will enable the organisation to implement the most effective action plans which, in turn, achieve high performance levels from within a company when analysed by location, division or even by team leader. It is also often interesting and valuable to be able to examine whether a company’s high performers’ answers differ from the rest of the employees.

**Breaking the data**

In order to ensure that a survey will provide useful, meaningful information, it is important to be able to break the data down to the right level. We generally find that there are significant differences in performance levels from within a company when analysed by location, division or even by team leader. It is also often interesting and valuable to be able to examine whether a company’s high performers’ answers differ from the rest of the employees.

If the survey data is broken down far enough, it is also possible to re-cut the information at a later date to isolate interesting details such as indicators for leaving the company. For example, if you are able to determine that a certain three factors are risk indicators for someone leaving the company you may be able to work on these issues to increase retention.

In addition to asking the right questions, the questions themselves need to be clear, concise and phrased in a similar way. It is also essential to respect people’s time by limiting the survey to around 10-20 minutes maximum and providing time during work hours to complete the survey.

There are a few deal breakers when conducting workplace surveys. To get an honest response you should never ask someone to put their name on it. It can also be hugely damaging to conduct a survey and then hide the results. A lot of companies have regretted not sharing negative results from a survey in the hope that they will just go away.

Another deal breaker is involving only a selection of staff. While it may seem tempting to randomly choose 50 percent of people in the organisation to give their opinion to cut costs, those not asked will immediately be alienated. It is important to ask all the staff.

**Post-survey analysis**

A key ingredient to a survey’s success is post-survey analysis. Once the data is collected, there should be time to analyse the survey results. Skilled people need to be involved in reviewing and uncovering the insights into how the organisation’s strengths and weaknesses are affecting business performance. For most organisations it is the senior leadership team which takes on this responsibility as involvement at this level ensures...
that resulting action plans secure the sponsorship, commitment and investment required to see them through.

Communication remains important after you have run the survey. All the efforts to maximise participation will have raised employees’ expectations, and this is the point when you let employees know that their voices have been heard. During this stage, employees need to be regularly updated on what the organisation is doing with the survey results and the action plans resulting from the survey.

Prompt communication of survey results and action plans helps to establish their credibility and convey the organisation’s determination to use them to become more effective. It is recommended that this communication is sent from a senior figure in the organisation, such as the CEO, MD or head of HR, to emphasise its importance and encourage employees to give it their full attention.

Running a workplace survey is a cost-effective way to gather valuable information about how an organisation’s strengths and weaknesses are affecting business performance. However, the additional effort that an organisation gives to taking action following a survey can make all the difference.

Comprehensive and honest employee feedback helps to generate high quality results, thus enabling the organisation to design and implement effective action plans which, in turn, achieve greatest traction amongst employees across the organisation.

Simon Woolley is the country manager—Reward, Talent and Effectiveness Services at Hay Group.