

Building an effective annual engagement survey

Whether you choose to gather employee feedback through focus groups, interviews or online surveys, these guiding principles will ensure you create an effective survey that helps your organization identify and take action in the areas where it is most needed.



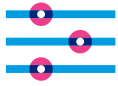
Write questions and response options that are easy to understand

- Consider your audience. What is the education level of your target population? Will the survey need to be translated?
- Avoid trendy expressions, colloquialisms, or internal expressions. People will interpret these items in various ways, which would create variability unrelated to the content.



Do not ask a question unless you plan on looking at the data

- Asking a question raises expectations among respondents that you are open to taking action on the item. At the same time, however, it may come across as callous to your employees to not ask about areas (such as pay and benefits) that you are typically limited in addressing.
- Realities are, of course, that your organization won't be able to take action on everything, but instead a subset of items that stand out within the survey. There may be some items that your organization is unable to take action on now, or perhaps don't align with your strategic priorities.
- Communicate with your employees what you heard and what the priority areas are, and why.



Use same scale throughout

- Using few or only one scale makes it easier to program the survey, report on the data, interpret the data, run statistical analysis, and perhaps most importantly, easier for the participant to respond to the question. Here are some examples:
 1. Overall, my manager is doing a good job. (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Don't Know/Not Applicable)
 2. My manager had a performance review with me this year. (Yes, No)
 3. My immediate manager/supervisor gives me feedback and coaching that helps me improve my performance. (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Don't Know/Not Applicable)
- In this example, it might seem simpler and obvious to phrase question 2 as a Yes/No item. However, a Yes/No item is going to lead to less variability in the data and less measure of the quality of that feedback. Thus, it is recommended to make this an agreement scaled question.



Avoid double-barreled questions

- A double-barreled question asks two different concepts in a single question. For example, "My manager has communicated our strategic direction and I understand it" are two different items/questions. What if their manager didn't communicate the strategic direction, maybe they heard it from a senior leader, but they still understand it — how should they answer the item? Technically, they should answer disagree or perhaps neither agree nor disagree.
- Avoid having multiple constructs in a question as it will make it difficult to interpret and thus difficult to take action on the survey.



Avoid negatively phrased questions

- Typically surveys are designed with mostly positively phrased questions, so adding a few items that are negative (and not identified as negative) will result in people not noticing the change and not answering in the direction they are intending.
- The negatively phrased item is a better item to test if the people are paying attention to the items rather than if they feel a certain way about the content of the item.
- A positive phrased item will help to avoid bad data. For example, "I intend on leaving my job in the next year" can be replaced with "I do not plan on leaving my job in the next year."



Arrange questions by referent or content area

- If asking a range of questions, ask by referent point. For instance, start with questions about your company, then questions about the leadership, followed by questions about department, then manager/ team, then the employee's local environment experience.
- This helps the respondent to determine that a particular topic is being asked about, perhaps a particular pain point about their manager, rather than responding to a similar question and hoping their sentiment is conveyed.



Avoid too many write-in/ comment questions

- One to two write-in questions is ideal; three is acceptable but getting to be too much. Any more than that the survey will take too long. As a general rule of thumb, each write-in question takes 1–2 minutes to complete.



Put demographic questions at the end

- Especially if demographic questions are personal or sensitive in nature, these should be put at the end.
- Including demographic questions at the start of the survey, before the respondent gets to see that nature of the items being asked, may cause unnecessary drop-outs from the survey or inaccurate demographic information being provided.



Avoid making all items mandatory

- Firstly, this is a voluntary survey, participants should only answer the questions they feel comfortable and qualified to answer. Secondly, it is annoying for the survey respondent if they cannot skip questions. The more annoyed a participant is, the less likely they will complete the survey.
- Avoid having multiple constructs in a question as it will make it difficult to interpret and thus difficult to take action on the survey.



Do not ask too many questions

- No more than 30–40 questions. Ensure the questions being asked are not redundant, easily observed and answered, and actionable.



Time to take the survey should be 15–20 minutes max

- Test the survey first. Complete the survey as if you are new to it and respond to every question, demographic question and write-in question — how long did it take? Longer than 15 minutes and people typically become distracted and less interested in finishing the survey.
- If developed correctly, each question should take less than 20 seconds to respond and each write in about 2 minutes.

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