

Capturing the employee voice to reshape reward policies

Unilever found that its policy for international assignees was lacking and wanted to gather employee feedback to help shape it. However, rather than use traditional surveys, it wanted to collate and analyze data more efficiently and with greater impact. Its answer: to design and create Opinion Space, an interactive social media tool that innovatively examines and displays feedback. **Peter Newhouse** tells us more.

Organizations in the fast-moving consumer goods industry are often described as “marketing companies with production facilities”. It is, therefore, no great surprise that corporate functions in businesses like Unilever are ahead of the game in learning from their marketers. Within Unilever, cross-functional collaboration has seen HR and internal communication tapping on the shoulder of marketing experts to have a peek at their skills and expertise – particularly in research and analysis.

This case study outlines a groundbreaking research project, building on techniques emerging from consumer research that employ social media principles and the latest data visualization technology. Forget your surveys and discard your focus group discussions – this project represents a new dawn for employee and internal communication research that has profound implications for how social research will be conducted. Before we go on to outline the business challenge faced by Unilever, it is worth briefly reviewing recent advances in the field of employee research.

New developments in employee research

The first of these developments is the relentless advance of social media. As organizations become more dispersed, social media is allowing some of them to rediscover the benefits of social interaction that occurred before a lot of work became largely solitary and desk-bound. Internal social networking platforms are growing in prominence and provide a burgeoning list of data streams for HR to analyze.

However, social media is edging into many HR tools and communication processes, including employee research. It's very powerful for obtaining feedback and sophisticated collaborative platforms are emerging. The crucial thing here is that employee research is becoming multi-directional – it's not just about employees filling in surveys in isolation, it's about them collaborating with each other, harnessing the wisdom of crowds and then distilling the essence of those conversations and interactions to achieve a level of insight that hasn't been previously possible.

The second big step forward is the ability to accurately and quickly extract insights from written data – which has been a huge barrier to HR and internal communication. Luckily, the rise of social media has been matched by the development of software that is able to efficiently analyze large amounts of written feedback. The power of text analytics is that it transforms text into data for analysis. There are now a multitude of sources (e.g. surveys, collaborative platforms etc.) from which internal communication can extract a whole new world of insight.

The third innovation is using data visualization as a user interface. It's common for people to think about data visualization as an output – indeed, there are several excellent data analysis tools that use visualizations to aid the interpretation of data. However, we are starting to see data visualization becoming a means of input and control – and this new breed of user interface has massive benefits for online social research. The problem with existing social media platforms in employee research is that they use a typical discussion forum/message board format that displays linear lists of comments. This can lead to information overload – employee collaboration tools that don't use data visualization interfaces are incapable of sustaining a large number of participants. Interactive visualizations also provide a compelling and engaging experience for participants who can “get something out of the process.”

All three of these recent advances were employed together at Unilever to create a powerful solution to a sensitive issue.

Reshaping international assignee reward

Unilever has 1,800 current and recent international assignees (IAs) – employees that have moved from their home country to work for the business in another country. Unilever's IA community is extremely important to the business, not only in terms of sharing knowledge and expertise across geographical diversity, but also in plugging skills gaps where adequate local talent cannot easily be recruited. The policies that govern the reward and support of IAs are an immensely complex area for any organization.

In 2007, several fundamental changes were made to Unilever's IA reward policy after little consultation with the IA community itself. Coupled with difficulties in implementation and delivery, it's perhaps no surprise that these policy changes were not well received. Three years further down the line, global reward strategists at Unilever found themselves in a difficult situation; there was consensus that the new policy wasn't working, but there was no clear agreement on how to move forward.

Part of the problem related to particular issues with the population in question. Not only is international assignee reward a highly complex and often contentious issue, but many of the IAs are senior people within a geographically dispersed group with different experiences. There was also reluctance, as is common in many organizations, to “ask the victims” – the idea is often seen as too much of a risk.

Despite this, Unilever sought to engage its IA community in reshaping the policy of the future. To do this effectively, there were several challenges that needed to be addressed:

- Participation rates for traditional online surveys conducted with this community had been as low as

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20 percent. Therefore whatever form the research took, the research interface had to be engaging.

- An engaging interface would also be required to ensure considered responses – a standard survey consisting of an agree-disagree Likert scale response format was not going to provide this (does it ever?).
- Geographical dispersion largely ruled out any face-to-face qualitative research, which can be tremendously time-consuming and expensive.
- The “authentic voice” of the IA community was required – this meant providing a means by which the community could interact to crowdsource the best ideas and suggestions about how to move forward. With 1,800 people involved, a traditional message board/discussion forum would simply not work.
- Given the subject matter, there was also a requirement to give IAs a clear impression of the sheer complexity of the issues at hand. How could the research be designed in such a way as to allow IAs to understand the spread of opinion that might exist in the community itself?
- Lastly, there was a need to afford IAs the opportunity to let off some steam – openly.

The solution – Opinion Space

Traditional online surveys have several limitations. They are often boring for participants, responses can seemingly disappear into a black hole that never feeds back, there is an over-reliance on quantitative data and there is no interaction between participants. As mentioned above, social media is increasingly being used to obtain feedback from employees. However, Unilever found that existing tools were incapable of sustaining a large number of participants.

Working with specialist employee research company Silverman Research (who helped develop the technology

Unilever is a global company that owns many of the world's consumer product brands in foods, beverages, cleaning agents and personal care products. It has 167,000 employees and its products are sold in 180 countries.



A collaborative, open-minded approach is a prerequisite for organizations embracing these technologies

with computer scientists at the University of California at Berkeley), Unilever adopted a ground-breaking new approach to obtaining feedback from employees.

The resulting tool, "Opinion Space" [see screenshot, below] moves beyond the traditional survey: it allows participants to see where they stand in relation to others, to interact and, most importantly, to crowdsource the best suggestions. This neatly aligns with the participatory culture that is becoming embedded in organizations and society in general.

How it works

Using sliders (as opposed to tick boxes), participants express their agreement with five broad statements about Unilever's IA policy. They are then prompted to respond to the question, "How could Unilever improve its IA policies?" Each participant, along with their suggestion, is mapped using advanced mathematics to a 2D plane so that participants with similar opinions are closer in spatial distance and vice versa. As a result, participants can instantly see the spread of opinions without having to read all of the comments and can immediately understand where they are positioned in relation to others. Participants can then click on the viewpoints of their fellow IAs to read and rate their suggestions in terms of relevance and insightfulness. This allows participants to easily navigate the space and the best suggestions to be identified.

Testing and implementation

The Unilever project team had to convince stakeholders that such a new research tool could be used effectively and that it would actually work. Several demonstrations of a prototype

were conducted, which were very helpful in explaining how the tool worked and what it would provide in terms of output. Rigorous testing was then conducted with Unilever IT and with IA champions to ensure there would be no technical issues.

Another barrier was convincing senior leaders to "let go" and risk receiving the negative reaction that they expected to get from IAs – that in a culture of participatory media, what employees say can no longer be controlled. In the event, participants were allowed to be anonymous in the research, and there was no censorship – a "flag comment" function was added to ensure that the system was self-policing and that any inappropriate



comments could be reported. In practice, not one single inappropriate comment was made.

The project was commissioned in January 2011. A detailed literature review and interviews with key stakeholders were conducted to develop draft questions. This was then refined through pilot interviews and testing with 30 IA champions to check the user interface. The project was launched to this seed group at the beginning of March 2011, followed by the main launch to all 1,800 participants one week later. In total, Opinion Space was open for three weeks, with participants encouraged to return to read and rate further comments. Analysis and reporting was complete by mid-May 2011.

A new level of insight

Project outcomes can be considered in terms of the benefits for participants, for Unilever and the further refinement of this exciting new method of research.

We received a great deal of feedback through the IA champions that participants valued being given a real voice to say what they wanted. Participants were able to see, instantly, where they stood in relation to other IAs and to read and rate the suggestions of their fellow IAs that they found very engaging. In total, just over 900 IAs (50%) participated in the research; an excellent response rate considering previous attempts to survey this population had achieved response rates as low as 20 percent.

For Unilever, policy changes are currently being planned and implemented in response to the research. By having participants rate each other's suggestions, Unilever was able to harness the wisdom of crowds. Coupled with the latest text and sentiment analysis techniques, this provided a whole new level of insight. For example, we were able to identify that suggestions made about cost of living allowance were written with a highly negative sentiment and, most importantly, the IA community rated these suggestions very highly.

The visualization afforded an understanding of the diversity of opinions that exist on this subject, so IAs better understand the complexity of the issues at hand. Moreover, the project was conducted at a fraction of the cost of a typical qualitative project involving discussion groups/interviews.

Spreading the gospel

As developments like these become more widespread, there will continue to be plenty of technical pitfalls to avoid and practical challenges to overcome – in IT integration, data security and so forth. But much more fundamentally, a collaborative and open-minded approach is a prerequisite for organizations embracing these technologies. By getting to grips with these

TOP TIPS

- Don't be afraid to "ask the victims" when it looks like policies aren't working.
- If you want the authentic voice of employees, you will not achieve it using surveys.
- Only social media that use data visualization as a user interface are capable of adequately sustaining a large number of participants.
- Allow employees the freedom to say what they want openly.
- Don't censor or select comments, let the community self-police comments.
- Use text and sentiment analysis to quickly distill the essence of conversations and combine this with traditional quantitative survey data to achieve the greatest insight.

developments, Unilever intends to get a higher level of engagement with its people through their closer involvement in policy development. Through that involvement we will increase the relevance of our policies to our people.

We believe that our employees (especially Millennials) have little interest in completing traditional surveys and forms and yet they expect their employers of choice to offer the kind of policies that they can relate to. Only by capturing the authentic voice of our employees with tools like Opinion Space can we make that alignment. Many organizations are not yet culturally ready to embark on such a journey and they will continue to live in the dark ages because they think they know what's best for their people. Most likely, they will be left far behind in a fast-changing world where people expect company policies and values to be increasingly relevant to them personally.

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