Is the employee survey dead?

Everyone hates staff surveys, but what can be done to gather opinion? Findings from SILVERMAN RESEARCH and HR MAGAZINE suggest a new model

The first recorded example of companies conducting job satisfaction surveys was in the 1960s. Since then, the world of work has changed almost beyond recognition, so why have many employee surveys failed to keep up?

When viewed against a backdrop of social media, instant messaging and consumer-driven feedback websites, the traditional employee survey looks increasingly stale. Social and digital tools now exist that allow for instant, continuous feedback or collaboration in real-time, so is the 'tick-box' approach to employee engagement really the way to go? Traditional surveys might provide data or standard HR metrics, but are their insights limited in today's workplace?

HR magazine teamed up with research company Silverman Research to explore how the future of employee surveys might look, and ask whether it's time to consign the traditional survey to the dustbin in favour of something more innovative.

Michael Silverman, managing director of Silverman Research, believes that although the traditional employee survey is still the most commonly used method to generate employee voice and opinion, there are several problems with this approach. On the most basic level, many are tedious to complete. "It's meant to be engaging but everyone hates staff surveys and they tend to be boring," he says. "There are too many questions and not enough focus on comments."

Then there's the reliance on tick-boxes, which might give HR departments quantifiable metrics, but do so at the expense of quality.

"When employees do bother to make comments, they tend to disappear into a corporate black hole," says Silverman. That's why, he adds, we need more collaborative ways of collecting the employee voice.

"People tend to make more of an effort with their comments if they know they are being read and rated by their peers," he explains. "Surveys done in isolation don't tell you about the voice of the community."

His are views that appear to be shared by the 250 people who took part in the research. The majority (53%) think the traditional survey will, or at least should, soon be extinct, and 69% think the future of employee opinion gathering will be qualitative rather than quantitative.

Respondents also think mobile and social technologies will make a huge imapct on how organisations gather opinion, although many companies have yet to catch on.

With real-time, collaborative opinion gathering tools available, we obviously have the technology listen to employees in a different way. So what is preventing organisations trying something new?

First, it's difficult to measure the ROI of collaboration. Then, as 71% of respondents agree, there's the fact leaders fear transparency. "There's a fear of transparency, a fear of looking stupid and a fear of losing control," says Silverman.

Over the next three pages, we reveal the top-line findings of the research and offer a glimpse into what the future of employee surveys might look like, according to the top-rated comments.

Visit the *HR* magazine website to download a full copy of the report for free. The online research is still open to explore at: bit.ly/12Ma11P.
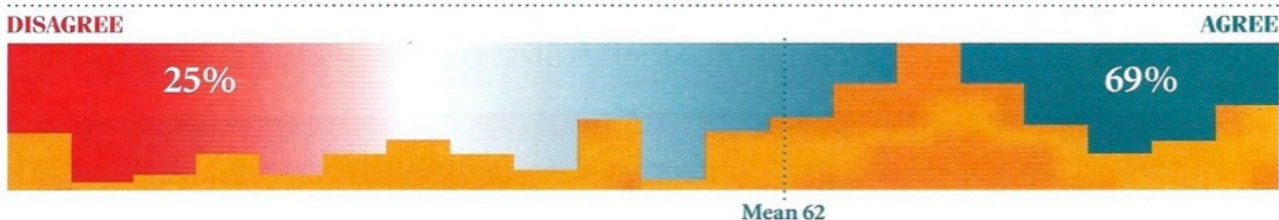
DO YOU AGREE
OR DISAGREE?
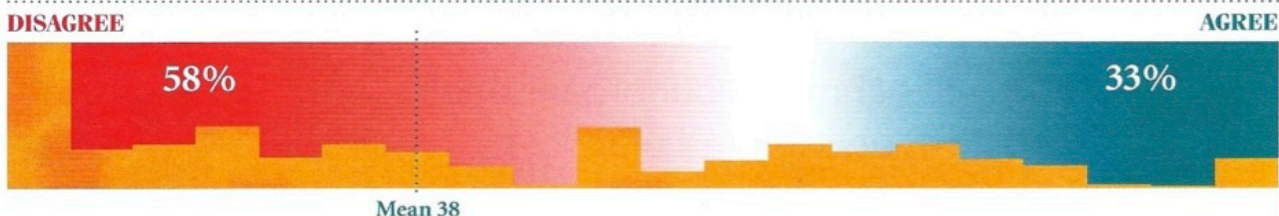
The future of
employee surveys.
How will they look?

**The traditional employee survey is dead**

DISAGREE | AGREE

37% | 53%

Mean 55
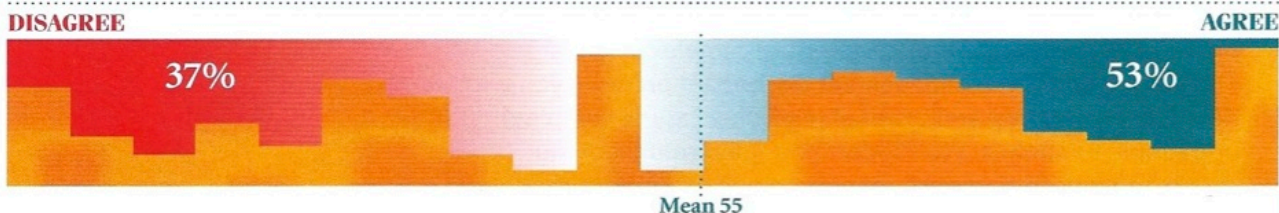
The future of employee research is qualitative as opposed to quantitative

DISAGREE | AGREE

25% | 69%

Mean 62

My organisation uses social technology to gather feedback from employees

DISAGREE | AGREE

58% | 33%

Mean 38

Mobile technology will become the most common way employees voice their opinion

DISAGREE | AGREE

13% | 82%

Mean 69
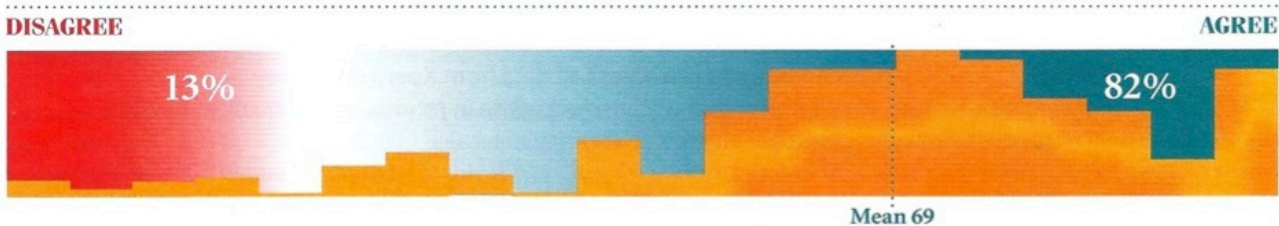
The biggest threat to advancing employee research is leaders' fear of transparency

DISAGREE | AGREE

24% | 71%

Mean 64
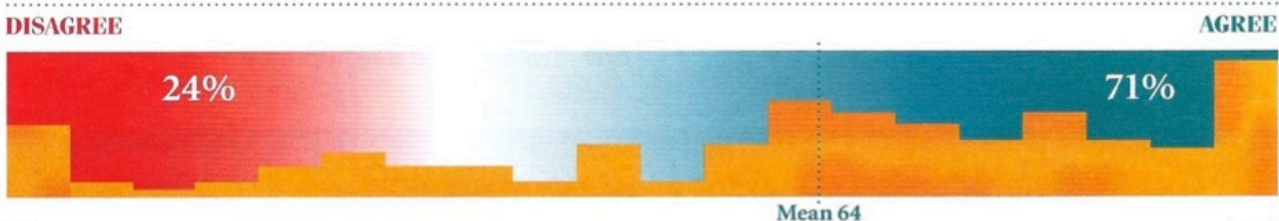
analytics (45%)

surveys (38%)

collaboration (29%)

social media (36%)

real-time (26%)

devices (23%)

qualitative (18%)

leadership (16%)

action (13%)

transparency (15%)

% = percentage of comments mentioning these words

As the graphic above shows, some words came up again and again as people shared their views. The larger the cloud, the more times the word was mentioned.

Coming out on top: 'analytics'. People using employee surveys are evidently looking for smarter ways to use the data they are gathering. Smart use of analytics could, in theory, help HR practitioners come up with proactive, rather than purely reactive, suggestions for improving the organisation.

'Social media' and 'collaboration' also score highly. "There will be more real-time collection of data," says Silverman.

In the full report, you can see how highly comments using these words were rated by the community. That means that although the word survey has been used a lot, the community has scored it low. So, although people are talking about surveys, they are not consistently referred to in a positive light.

'Action' and 'transparency' may have been mentioned slightly less regularly, but they are the two words rated highest. It's clear that people want research that gives actually leads to results.

"Results being actionable was a big theme," says Silverman. "If your research isn't telling you what to do, it's a load of rubbish." In practice, actionable research means identifying the key areas you want to tackle before asking questions, and then getting suggestions for solutions from the community you want to reach.

Transparency is another key theme, but it is also where employee opinion surveys run into trouble, as the results on the previous page show. As with all social technologies, leaders need to let go a bit to generate the best results.

These words, and the comments on the next page, paint a bright, innovative future for employee opinion gathering. The question is: can organisations and technology rise to the challenge? **HR**

TOP-RATED COMMENTS

All respondents to the research were invited to leave qualitative comments. Those comments were then rated by other participants. These are the top five comments, in descending order, as rated by the community.

The difference will be amazing. Today, we create hypotheses and then go collect data. Tomorrow, we'll be doing the inverse. The constant, steady state accumulation of data will enable us to look at the data before we form out questions. That means that we'll be getting answers to questions we didn't know to ask. We will be unthinking a whole bunch of things we assume to be facts.

John Sumer
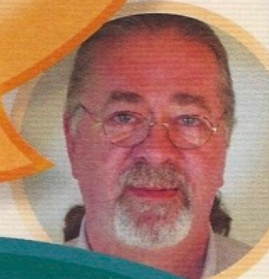
In the ideal world it would take HR no more than 15 more years to stop telling people what to do and how to do it and then doing it for them. Instead, HR will focus on what works well by observing and learning from people and then telling other people in the organisation about it so they can observe it and learn from it too.

newhouse

As the demographic of our workforce changes and access to social media increases, employee research will move away from the traditional annual employee survey to more frequent and interactive research. As people become more confident in using social media, their confidence will grow in being open and honest around the way they feed back and comment on their employer. The biggest challenge is that leaders are not moving as quickly as employees. They need to become more confident and engaged with new media and have the commitment to respond and act on employee comments. It will become more real-time and challenge leaders to be more proactive and demonstrate the positive behaviours we are always promoting.

caroline

Employees' behaviour will be increasingly traceable and measurable as more information about their activity is electronically captured. Organisations will be better at studying these patterns of behaviour in the same way that consumer behaviour is studied. So, rather than asking people questions which are subject to their mood and interpretation, organisations will be using objective metrics.

burtie14

The annual employee survey is dead. With new SaaS-based, always-on, real-time technologies, the ability to gauge mood, trends and changes every day has never been easier. No longer is it enough to take a single annual snapshot and think this is employee engagement. By taking constant views of individuals' everyday ups and downs and in conjunction with enlightened leaders who have a strategy to action this feedback, a company can truly gauge the mood of its employees.

neddog