

Employee Opinion Surveys – What They Are Really Thinking

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Many companies are already having a difficult time finding, keeping and motivating employees. Unfortunately, the market is going to become even more challenging for employers in the near future. As a result of the aging of America and other reasons, the Bureau of Labor Statistics believes that by 2010 there will be approximately 10 million more jobs than people to fill them in the United States. Some analysts, looking at the mismatch between where people are located and where they are needed, those who choose not to work and other factors, believe that the shortfall could be as high as 30 million people. Almost every industry and occupation will be impacted.

This shortfall is not going to happen “somewhere else.” The market in the Midwest is already tight and will see a shortfall of at least 18,000 employees. Blending in other factors, the actual shortage could be much larger. One thing is for sure – if you lose an employee in the future, you may not get one back.

As a result of the super-tight labor market, turnover will increase as employees go from one labor-starved company to another. Wages and benefit costs will also increase as employers attempt to remain competitive and stabilize their workforce.

Unfortunately, this labor crisis comes at a time when American businesses can ill afford it. In today's fast paced, global economy, competitors move aggressively where opportunity presents itself. Employers who do not deal effectively and quickly to maintain the quality and stability of their workforce will find themselves at a significant competitive disadvantage to both domestic and international competitors.

Conversely, those that focus on good employee relations will be rewarded with employee loyalty, less headaches, better customer relations and more profit. Both common sense and numerous studies indicate that employee commitment is associated with better job performance. Bashaw and Grant (1994) and DeCotis and

Summers (1987) indicated that committed employees were more productive as measured by sales and control of operational costs. Rucci, Kim and Quinn (1988) found that every five percent improvement in employee attitudes resulted in a 1.3 percent improvement in customer satisfaction.

Unless your business has vast economic resources and you foresee no need to invest in additional advertising, product development, capital equipment purchase, or technological updates, you will need to develop a workplace that people value as much or more than money and benefits. Said another way, if the only incentives you can offer to compete for available talent are money and benefits, you will find yourself dealing with higher turnover, lower productivity, quality and customer retention.

The changes required will not be found in any of today's business "miracle" books. Adding a Corporate Hood Ornament[®] program or two — programs that look good but add little fundamental value to the employer/employee relationship — will only reduce the amount of money and focus available to make truly helpful changes. Quick fixes rarely fix anything except a consultant's bank balance. True fixes come because of renewed focus and commitment to the building strong working and personal relationships with your employees.

There are many important approaches to become a "work relationship of choice" employer. Start by finding out what your employees are **really** thinking about your company, policies, employee relations, benefits and other important matters.

While there are a number of ways to do this, there is none better than a well designed and administered employee opinion survey. Employee surveys, properly done, provide the quantitative data needed to prioritize improvement efforts and to measure progress toward employee relations goals. Data generated from surveys also promote greater accountability for the quality of the employee/employer relationship. Once both your employees and management staff see your commitment to measuring employee relations progress, they will work harder to deliver the results you want. What gets measured, gets done.

Do A Survey Worth Doing

Don't do an employee survey yourself or buy one of the "off-the-shelf" varieties available. Most organizations lack the time and experience needed to design a good survey. Off-the-shelf surveys often don't fully respond to the unique data needs of individual companies — both in terms of the questions asked and in terms of reports

generated. No survey is better than the data you receive from it. Surveys customized to the specific needs of your work force are not as expensive as you may think. The ignorance of not knowing what your employees are thinking, however, often is a very expensive, silent profit killer.

Use An Outside Provider

If you want objective, honest feedback, bringing in an outside provider is very important. Most employees will not answer candidly if they know that there is even the slightest chance that what they say on a survey may be traced back to them. Outside providers enhance the perception of both management commitment to the survey and its confidentiality. These, in turn, encourage more honest and useful feedback.

Find an outside provider who will connect with your workforce. The attributes (maturity, work history and experience, communications skills, etc.) of your provider have a tangible impact on survey response quality. Additionally, attempt to locate a provider who will personally proctor all surveys to ensure that proper instructions are given to survey participants. Poor instruction and understanding of the survey, will negatively impact the overall value of the survey – garbage in, garbage out.

Publicize the Results

Your workforce already knows how it feels about your work environment. They talk about it every day when you aren't around. What they want to know is if YOU know how they feel and if you are willing to honestly report on the results of the survey. This is a key opportunity to build credibility with your employees. One of the worst things you can do is to fail to provide feedback to those who were surveyed or to unnecessarily sugarcoat the findings.

If employees don't get quality communication on the results of a survey, they feel that you there is no real value placed upon their input. This is not the message you want to send. Further, lack of good feedback on survey results virtually guarantees that your employees will not take subsequent surveys seriously.

Your employees will either talk to you or about you. They will either focus on how to help the organization meet its goals or how you fail to provide them a workplace that fully meets their needs. Good surveys provide you with the information you need to become the type of employer you would like to be.

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