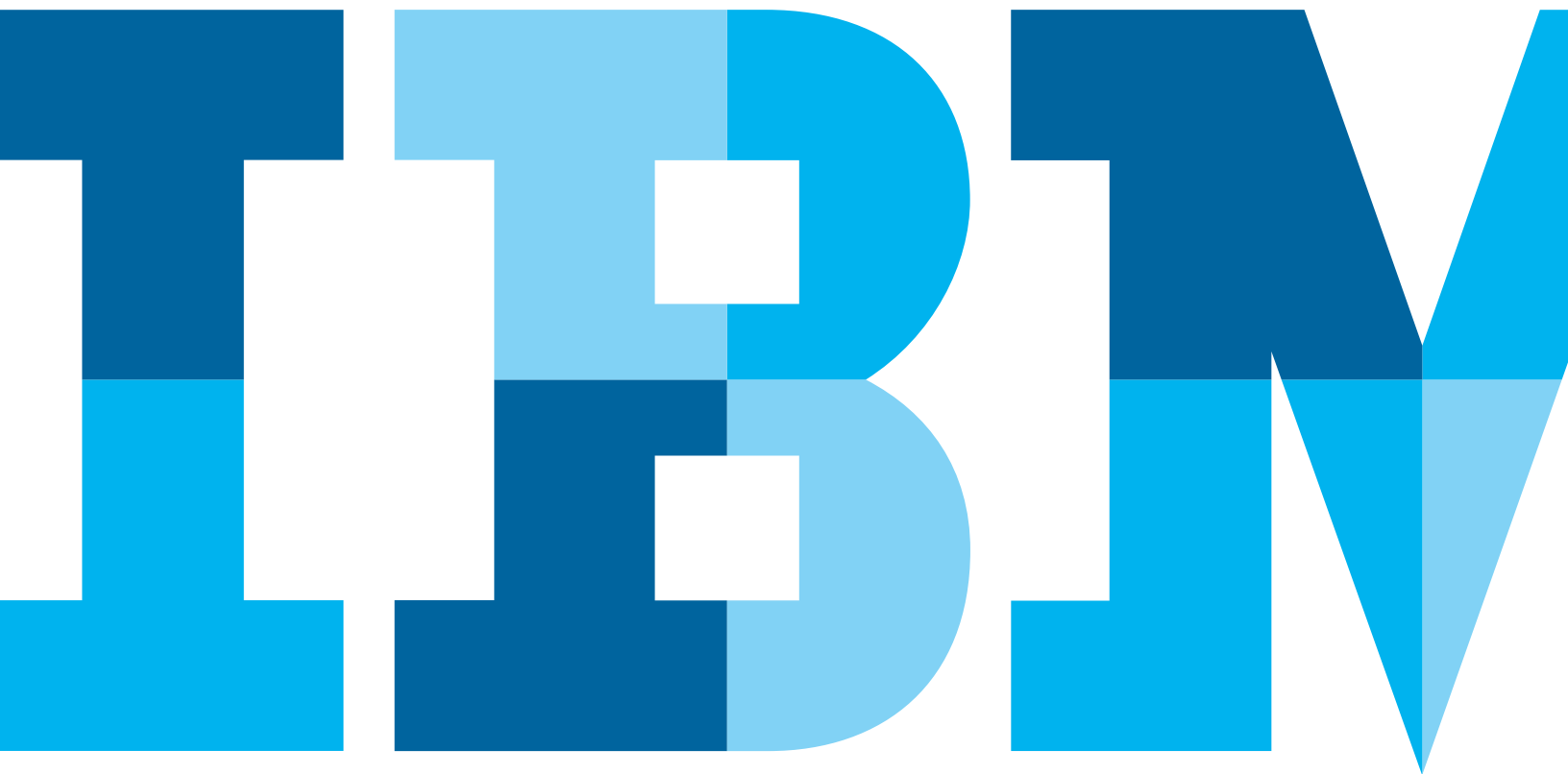


## Why survey?

*Transform your business*

*By Sara Weiner, Ph.D., IBM Software Group*



To be in a leadership role, especially in today's challenging and ever-changing economic environment, takes courage, conviction and wisdom. Being a leader requires a deep understanding of the elements of success and the derailers to avoid. Challenges faced in each organization must be clearly understood, documented and solved in order to remain competitive and viable. Asking questions is one of the most powerful tools leaders have at their disposal. "Great leaders are both good questioners and good listeners – they recognize that they do not have all the answers" (Karsan, 2010, pp. 20-21). An organizational assessment is a critical tool that contributes to the answers leaders must have to guide their organizations to become top performers in their industries and employers of choice.

To achieve global and local strategic objectives, IBM recommends that organizational assessments, also known as employee surveys, be conducted at least annually. There are few, if any, metrics used by organizations to guide business decisions that are collected less often than annually. The majority of annual reports tout talent as an organization's "most important asset." Virtually every Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Operating Officer (COO), Human Resources Vice President (HR VP) and business leader needs to understand the perceptions of employees regarding organizational functioning and climate to better guide talent-related decisions that drive the organization toward business goals. An employee survey provides critical data to build on strengths and act on weaknesses to transform knowledge into action.

An organizational survey is a business necessity and equally as critical as gathering customer-satisfaction and sales performance data to guide decision making. Employee intelligence is on par with the importance of competitor intelligence. Without all the data in hand, how would an organization know which strengths it can build upon, which weaknesses must be addressed or how to capitalize on outstanding ideas from employees for innovations and solutions?

Linkage research consistently has shown the relationship of employee attitudes to business success and, in recent years, the power of engagement in driving customer satisfaction, profit, revenue and shareholder return (Wiley, 1996; Wiley & Campbell, 2006).

So the question of "Why survey?" might also be framed as "Why not survey?"

- Why not identify the links and levers of business metrics that can be leveraged for business improvement?
- Why not identify areas where engagement or morale is low to see if there is a leadership, environmental or other challenge that can be remedied to clear the way for greater achievement?
- Why not identify specific developmental needs and tools managers can use to increase their business skills and people skills?
- Why not assess how well leaders are meeting the requirements to drive an engaged workforce and a high performance organization (see Wiley, 2010, p. 49)?
- Why not establish a structured vehicle for communication between employees and the various levels of management?
- Why not gather critical information about employees that is otherwise scattered? Without a survey, views of employees about many topics would be difficult, if not impossible, to capture in a cohesive way (perceptions on the effectiveness of senior leaders and their communications, immediate manager effectiveness and support, process efficiency, customer focus, growth and development, rewards and recognition, etc.).
- Why not understand the perceptions of your top performers and high-potentials?
- Why not understand the perceptions of those who fill your mission-critical jobs?
- Why not understand how your organization compares to benchmark (normative) data about employees in your industry and in the countries in which you operate, so you can gain clarity of your position as an employer of choice?

- Why not use a survey as an early warning indicator of potential areas of concern, so issues can be addressed before they have a negative effect?
- Why not limit surprises? Proactively seeking out information is preferable to relying on inconsistent and potentially unreliable sources that might either alert management to genuine issues or end up being red herrings that waste time.
- Why not collect information that can lead to improving the lives of those who spend eight to 12 hours of their day working to help your organization accomplish its mission?

Is the expenditure worth it? The cost of not collecting attitudes and opinions of employees is much higher than the resources required collecting those opinions. The old adage, “What you do not know cannot hurt you,” does not apply to your workforce. If you do not survey, rumors and anecdotes likely will fill the void and replace statistically representative views of employees. Actions taken as a result of this misinformation are likely to be misguided or even harmful to workplace climate and organizational performance.

When a survey is conducted, accurate information is gathered and factual data guide decisions. Using the data to provide insightful guidance can drive very positive effects on the organization’s business goals and on employees’ work lives.

Alternatively, collecting data and not using the results can have the opposite effect. There are two reasons an organization should NOT survey:

- If information will be collected and then sit in a file drawer instead of being shared and used to make positive organizational changes.
- If the purpose is punitive – to punish employees or managers.

## Why survey rather than use other methods or data?

### Can we generalize from other known information/research?

Some things are generalizable, such as the understanding we now have of the relationship of engagement and performance excellence to business outcomes. It is essential to evaluate and use what is already known to understand data in a broader context. However, the diagnostics gained from a customized survey go further and pinpoint areas of concern in the organization overall, as well as identifying specific areas of concern in individual units, countries and teams. Having data about areas of the organization that are performing well gives the organization an ability to identify internal best practices that will work in the unique environment of that organization. Engagement and organizational climate are also highly influenced by the industry to which the organization belongs (e.g., manufacturing, professional services and healthcare are all quite distinct from one another). Each country’s culture also exerts a significant influence (Aycan, 2000). Collecting data from various subareas of the organization, such as business units, and in the world, such as countries, will guide customized action responses that are infinitely more effective than general action responses.

### Can qualitative research (focus groups/roundtables, interviews) be an alternative to surveys?

Qualitative methods are good for providing information complementary to quantitative data, especially in preparation for an organization’s first-year survey. However, the combination of closed and open-ended (write-in) questions in a survey, along with team-level and senior management discussions, should be sufficient to identify actions needed to drive positive change. Qualitative research is not typically representative of the employees, given the limited number of people included. This type of research is also time consuming. A thoughtfully designed survey can help minimize/eliminate the need to conduct focus groups or other qualitative research.

### **Can perusing social media venues provide the data needed?**

Yammer™, Blogs, Wikis, Facebook®, Twitter™ and proprietary community sites (private Facebook-like sites) are gaining popularity as communication vehicles. There are benefits to using social media to enhance engagement. However, typically, the information available via social media is not collected in a structured way; therefore, the information will not necessarily be an accurate representation of the feelings of the employees. Information from these sources as a replacement for survey data is deficient at best and can be misleading at worst. Business decisions based on this input could be misdirected. In addition, monitoring these sources is labor intensive. That said, social media is here to stay and should be mined to contribute to the total picture of “metric” input.

### **The employee lifecycle context**

Employee surveys are optimized when they are an integrated part of understanding talent in the context of the employee lifecycle. Surveys should not be considered in a vacuum. For example, one use of survey data is to understand the individual and environmental characteristics of the best performers in the company. When integrated with employee selection and development metrics, the survey data can help inform employee selection and development decisions. As a result, better individual selection and development approaches can be implemented, and the characteristics of a supportive workplace environment for the best performers can be replicated more broadly in the organization.

A long-term goal should be to collect relevant talent metrics across the lifecycle of an employee in an organization, so a detailed review and analysis can be conducted to identify critical components for enhancing performance in your organization. For example, rich information is available through recruiting data, selection assessments, onboarding surveys, performance appraisals, multi-rater (360) results, development assessments, social media sites, award/recognition programs and exit surveys (especially from regretted losses).

Creating the means for a total view of the organization via workforce analytics is not turnkey. Data often are kept in different formats, and many organizations do not have a centralized or standardized approach to collecting the data used to manage their talent. The ability to determine patterns that can enhance performance is, however, a desirable long-term goal. To establish a more extensive approach of triangulating multiple sources of data requires working across silos that traditionally have independently owned certain parts of the employee lifecycle.

### **Frequency and coverage: when and who to survey?**

Organizations frequently seek recommendations concerning the timing of surveys and the proportion of the organization they should cover. The IBM consulting position is that an annual census survey is a best practice. Other types of surveys, such as a biannual census or sample, or a quarterly pulse, can provide checkpoints to determine if actions being taken are on track. The specific timing of a survey should take into account the time of year and other business activities that may be concurrent with the dates of survey administration and release of data. For example, some competing activities include salary performance management administration, annual budget planning, holidays, summer vacations, end-of-year holidays for retail or tax season for financial services. Also consider when the results will be most valuable; that is, when the input will be needed for critical decisions. For example, structure the timing of the survey so the presentation of results is available in time for a quarterly leadership meeting or a board meeting.

Later in this paper (page 8), we consider a variety of approaches and describe the advantages and disadvantages to the business.

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### **Annual census**

IBM consulting recommends an annual census – yearly administration of an employee survey to 100 percent of employees – as a best practice to drive positive organizational change. A census survey allows metrics at various levels of the organization to drive business decisions. In addition, surveying 100 percent of employees allows a forum for each employee to express his or her opinion – for each employee to have a voice.

An ongoing annual survey allows time for most action plans to be implemented and have an effect, so evidence of the organizational change is then seen in subsequent survey results. Allowing this time between surveys provides a more accurate reflection of the effectiveness of actions taken than when the measurement is premature (i.e., one quarter later – see the discussion regarding quarterly surveys on page 6).

Conducting census surveys with reports to first-line managers requires substantial resources and often makes the most sense annually. We do not recommend conducting a census more frequently than annually because the law of diminishing returns factors in – the benefits gained from more frequently surveying the entire organization are unlikely to outweigh the costs and impact on resources. In addition, there would continue to be the challenge of enough time elapsing to see the effects of results in subsequent surveys.

Some of the reasons for leveraging smaller scope surveys (less than 100 percent of the population) or less frequent surveys (less than annual) could include a limited budget, sensitivity issues (e.g., areas of the company that are “off limits,” such as those engaged in active union negotiations), or leadership support complications (such as lack of full buy-in on the value of surveys). Several options are described below.

### **Pulse survey**

A pulse survey could be a random sample of employees across the organization, or a subset of business units. Results from a sample survey in this case would be available to higher-level personnel in the organization, and not typically to lower levels, such as first-line managers.

A pulse survey also could utilize a census survey approach yet include fewer questions that cover critical indices, such as engagement and performance excellence, along with key focus areas identified in the last census. In this case, the results could be made available to the lowest levels in the organization.

A pulse survey can be scheduled between annual census surveys (e.g., at the six month mark) to ascertain whether actions are on track or need adjustment. This approach is a terrific way of monitoring progress and tweaking the direction of actions to help ensure they are the most effective.

Some organizations alternate a pulse survey with a full census survey every other year. The advantage of this strategy can be a reduction of needed resources for the project during the pulse year; and the disadvantage is less complete information about trends and current-state information to use for business decisions. When organizations are used to the data mining available in census surveys, senior managers might be frustrated when the sample data cannot offer the same level of detail in the analyses.

### **Quarterly samples**

Quarterly samples include a subset of the total employee population or a subset of business units. The survey is administered four times a year. The advantage of having results from surveys on a quarterly basis is that it allows alignment of the employee data with other business metrics that are usually quarterly. This alignment encourages “board room” discussion of the employee intelligence data as frequently as other business

measures. Given the demonstrated linkage between employee engagement and business outcomes, this alignment is a beneficial aspect of more frequent organizational surveys.

On the other hand, surveys conducted this frequently do not usually show much change in results. Actions taken to effect organizational change typically take longer than three months. When change is not seen on the survey, leaders might prematurely derail actions in progress due to the belief that they are ineffective, when in fact those actions might not yet have had time to make an impact. Availability of more frequent data also can result in analysis paralysis syndrome, or out-of-control balanced scorecards – that is, spending critical resources on monitoring and analyzing the numbers versus spending time and effort on taking effective action. Another challenge with comparing results from surveys conducted at different times of the year is the influence of external factors. For example, if salary administration or performance management processes were happening during administration of the survey, they would likely have an influence on results. Comparison between quarters is more difficult given the different business context in each quarter. That said, it is important to consider external factors and put the results in context when drawing conclusions about survey results or trends.

One disadvantage of a strategy that relies solely on smaller samples of an organization is that workgroups at lower levels rarely get to see data for their group (results usually are reported at a higher level in the organization, such as the business unit or country). This approach puts the burden of action on middle and senior management and does not leverage the great improvements that can be driven, or even should be driven, from a grassroots level. Another disadvantage of solely relying on sample surveys is that some employees might never get the opportunity to voice their opinions.

### **Less than annual**

IBM consultants agree that surveys conducted less frequently than annually are usually not effective in motivating and sustaining positive change in an organization. For good reason, there are few examples of organizational metrics collected less frequently than annually. Metrics are needed at least annually to guide sound business decisions.

Many annual reports refer to employees as the most important asset of the company. Why would we not make sure we have a clear understanding at least annually of the views of our most important asset for leadership effectiveness, customer orientation, quality, teamwork, effective processes and other critical components of organizational performance?

Being out of touch with employees for longer than a year provides ripe opportunity for issues to fester, resulting in surprises that are more difficult to resolve. In a long-term trend analysis of the IBM WorkTrends™ survey results (an annual study of full-time employees), a substantial drop in employees' satisfaction scores in the US is seen from 2005 to 2007 (Kenexa, 2010). The one year the WorkTrends survey was not conducted was in 2006. Had this been a specific company using a biennial cadence for their survey, then the 2007 results would have been a rude awakening. However, if a survey had been conducted annually, the declining trend would have been seen sooner and issues would have been addressed that might have averted the continuing downward slide.

Organizational performance is affected when issues fester. Some might argue that organizations can see those “issues” clearly enough through other means. That might be true for obvious organizational challenges, such as a manager who is a poor leader, or severe absenteeism, or turnover in a particular unit that is a red flag of discontent. But there might be other difficult-

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to-detect issues, such as people not putting in the optimum discretionary effort the company requires to compete effectively in the marketplace. If there are no other good vehicles for expressing employee concerns (e.g., a grievance process), or the trust is low in less confidential processes that are in place, or those processes do not quite fit the bill for the opinion/idea/creative solution the employee wishes to express, then those issues and creative solutions are likely to continue to go undetected and the organization will likely perform at a suboptimal level. Surveys help to manage the critical ingredients for being an employer of choice and a competitive player in your industry.

Conducting an annual survey also offers some practical and tactical advantages. An annual process helps ensure the “machine” is in place to conduct the survey and get reports out. A more regular process leads to process efficiencies, familiarity with tools and an experienced global team to execute the project and provide support to senior leadership and to the various levels of managers in report interpretation and an effective action response. A successful survey program is one in which the action-response relationship is strong; the survey becomes an integral part of the fabric of the business, is perceived as valuable by each employee and leader and is, in actuality, a useful business tool.

#### **Eighteen-month cycles**

An annual survey typically holds the time of year constant, so external influences on the data are similar year-over-year. A survey conducted every 18 months compares data with previous surveys at a completely different time of year. As mentioned earlier, business activities in the annual cycle, such as salary administration, performance appraisals, quarterly business requirements and holidays do have an effect on employee perceptions. When surveys are conducted at a similar time each year, these external influences are held constant.

## **Conclusion**

To have a keen focus on aspects of your organization that drive success; to revitalize in this challenging global economy; to function smoothly; to develop exceptional workers who are disciplined, focused on customers, committed to high quality, and who are qualified, diverse and expert in their fields; to be an employer of choice; and to achieve the most effective, efficient and successful organization – all require a company to establish an annual employee survey process, including a strong action response, as an essential component of strategic business planning



Survey type	Advantages	Disadvantages
Annual census	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 100 percent of employees are surveyed and have opportunity to express opinions</li> <li>• Results reported for various levels in the organization</li> <li>• Results provide information about trends and current-state information critical for making informed business decisions</li> <li>• Allows sufficient time for action plans to result in organizational change between survey administrations</li> <li>• Capitalizes on process efficiencies by surveying each year</li> <li>• Survey becomes an integral part of the organization's culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Execution of survey process requires substantial resources</li> </ul>
Pulse: sample	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use same survey questions administered during the annual census to measure progress</li> <li>• Execution can require fewer resources than the annual census</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results available for higher levels in organization only</li> </ul>
Pulse: census/ reduced items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 100 percent of employees are surveyed</li> <li>• Shortened survey requires less time from respondents</li> <li>• Results reported for various levels in the organization</li> <li>• Execution of survey process might require somewhat fewer resources than the annual census</li> <li>• Easier for managers to digest shorter surveys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to limit questions—might not be able to include all important questions</li> <li>• Results provide less complete information about trends and current-state information</li> </ul>
Quarterly: typically a sample	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows for alignment of employee data with business metrics collected quarterly</li> <li>• Can change direction and get new results quickly when results indicate to do so</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequency of surveys makes it difficult to demonstrate positive change—leaders might derail actions, mistakenly dismissing them as ineffective because they have not had time to have an effect</li> <li>• Susceptibility to analysis paralysis syndrome or out-of-control balanced scorecards</li> <li>• External factors influence results when surveys are conducted at different times during the year</li> <li>• Results available for top levels in organization only</li> <li>• Execution of survey process requires greater resources</li> </ul>
Less than annual: biennial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost savings over an annual process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less effective for motivating and sustaining positive organizational change</li> <li>• Being out of touch with employees can result in unwelcome surprises (e.g., significant drops in engagement that could have been avoided)</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Survey types: Advantages and disadvantages



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Sara P. Weiner, Ph.D, formerly an executive consultant and consulting director, Kenexa lead a team specializing in designing insightful employee survey programs that encourage assessment-based organizational change. Based on 20 years of results-focused consulting experience, Dr. Weiner has applied her innovative employee research and intelligence to inform business strategies that improve organizational performance for companies such as Atlantic Health, EFI, Nike, Ingersoll Rand, Pitney Bowes and PwC. Before joining Kenexa, Dr. Weiner spent more than 16 years with IBM as an internal consultant, where she was responsible for conducting enterprise-wide survey research, including the Global Pulse, Global Work and Life issues, and Human Resources (HR) client satisfaction surveys.

Dr. Weiner has published a number of book chapters and articles, and is a frequent presenter at national conferences. Her research interests include attraction and retention of top talent, career opportunity, downsizing, work/life policies and programs, telework success factors and linkage of employee engagement and business outcomes. She was a former representative for IBM to the IT Survey Group and the Mayflower Group, and was a Mayflower Research Chair. Dr. Weiner is a member of the American Psychological Association and the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and was the 2010 Program Chair for the annual conference. She holds a Master of Arts and a Doctorate in industrial and organizational psychology from the University of Connecticut.

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