COMMENTARIES

Identified Employee Surveys: Lessons Learned

ANDREW BIGA, A. SILKE McCANCE, AND ADAM J. MASSMAN
The Procter & Gamble Company

The Procter & Gamble Company (P&G) has a proud history of using surveys to assess the attitudes and opinions of our employees for nearly 80 years. The P&G Survey, as it exists today, consists of approximately 80 core items that tap into employee attitudes, satisfaction, and engagement. It is delivered to over 100,000 employees, in 80+ countries, in 20+ languages, and is designed to replace all other employee surveys at P&G. Our Employer of Choice model serves as a foundation for the P&G Survey. This model is based on research conducted with external job applicants on what constitutes an ideal work setting, a review of historical internal employee surveys, and a review of external surveys on what it takes to be a great place to work. Over the years, we have used both anonymous and identified surveys. Currently, the P&G Survey is an identified survey, and we conduct linkage research with a variety of data sources including attrition data, business unit financial data, and other data sources. P&G’s longstanding survey tradition puts us in a unique position to share lessons learned and offer guidelines and considerations for using identified surveys. These recommendations have served us well as we continue to strike a balance between science and practice—using survey methodology to improve the work life of our employees.

1. Build flexible systems and use identified surveys when possible. We fully agree with Saari and Scherbaum’s position on professional practice guidelines and their intent. If managed appropriately, identified surveys can bolster your research efforts. One common misstep that can occur while conducting survey research in the field is the inability to answer a new, pressing business question. Survey research takes time and resources, and the nature of current business questions can change quickly. Building flexibility into your research program is a good idea. Anonymous surveys are less flexible and do not allow for linkage research. You may not know at the time of data collection that linkage research is needed, as new data may become available post launch or a new business problem can emerge that demands your attention. Even research on a narrow topic may be a candidate for linkage research to better understand a related but different business question. Using identified surveys allows for greater flexibility and enables future linkage

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrew Biga.
E-mail: biga.a@pg.com
Address: The Procter & Gamble Company, 2 P&G Plaza, TN4, Cincinnati, OH 45202
efforts that may not be fully conceived at the time of data collection.

2. **Informed consents need to be specific and clearly articulate intent.** We follow the Safe Harbor principles and European Union’s 1998 Directive on Data Protection to create an informed consent approach that enables our linkage research efforts. Adhering to these standards can also assist in obtaining work council approval from various countries. Informed consents allow you to clearly articulate the intent of any future linkage efforts without harming your employees’ perception of your research program. Similarly, detailed communication that clearly delineates any survey changes is critical and can help educate your employees ahead of time to ensure expectations are being managed. Using an identified survey format, if managed and communicated appropriately, can have positive impact on response rate. We experienced an increase in response rate after switching to an identified survey format. This could be a result of P&G’s long history of surveying employees, building trust in the program over a number of years. In spite of all their benefits, informed consents may not be advisable in all situations. If there are no plans to link the survey data, then informed consents may not be appropriate. For more targeted survey efforts, a long informed consent may seem out of place and may contribute to a lower response rate. There is a balance as you weigh the potential insight you could gain from linkage research and the negatives that come with long, detailed informed consents.

3. **Informed consents about linkage research need to be transparent and at the end of the survey.** If the survey will be linked to other data sources, there should be clear communication to employees about this. Following the Safe Harbor principles of notice and choice, we provide examples of the type of data we might link and describe the purpose of such linkage. Our annual survey presents two separate informed consents to our employees.

At the beginning of the survey, we use an informed consent to link survey responses to organization-specific demographic data, such as business unit, function, or region. Organization-specific demographics are system driven and pulled directly from our company’s database. Only a small percentage of employees opt out of the informed consent at the beginning of the survey, with the result that their scores are only included in total company reports. Using system-driven demographics ensures greater accuracy for some of our basic reporting needs. A clear informed consent upfront helps ensure that a high percentage of employees opt in and we can accurately link demographic data.

To gather data on more personal demographics, such as race, gender, and company tenure, we ask employees directly to self-identify and provide this information at the end of the survey. This helps provide transparency to the process. We feel it is unfair to give an informed consent to linkage research before employees have actually answered any of the survey items. Until you know the questions and the way you have responded, you may not want to give consent to this type of research. After completing the survey, including the personal demographic section at the end, we ask a final informed consent to conduct more traditional linkage research in the future. We have found that a high percentage of employees are willing to give consent to linkage research efforts if the intent is clearly stated.
4. Use a threshold number for reporting to help ensure confidentiality. A threshold number is the minimum sample size required to run analyses for a given group. We use a minimum sample size of 10 when reporting information for demographic groups, and a minimum sample size of 25 for any reporting based on linkage research. Adhering to a minimum threshold policy in survey reports eases anxiety about identification and helps ensure confidentiality, as reports will not be produced for unique demographic combinations (e.g., White men working in HR on survey efforts). This type of information reporting threshold should be included upfront in your survey process.

5. Partner with key stakeholders to educate employees on identification. Demographic data is extremely important to our survey efforts and helps us better understand how key stakeholders respond to the survey. We have a long history of partnering with our diversity and inclusion practitioners to report survey results. A common concern is how to interpret data from employees who skip or choose “prefer not to answer” on some key demographics such as race or gender. It is difficult to provide actionable insight on these populations as we do not know much about them. Our diversity network helps to communicate the intent behind personal demographic data collection in our survey efforts. As a result of having a second source explain the nature, our efforts have increased demographic identification. In fact, we have found that many groups want to be identified to make sure their voices are heard.

6. Develop protocol on how to handle qualitative data prior to asking open-ended questions. Text responses to open-ended questions add many rich elements to the employee survey process, providing texture and background to the quantitative results (Willig, 2001). Qualitative data can harbor suggestions for innovation of processes and procedures, offer invaluable insights from employees, and potentially drive positive organizational change. However, text responses also raise a host of issues that need to be considered before launch of any survey program. Text analysis may lead to identification concerns. Some people choose to identify themselves and even go as far as asking to be contacted, providing their name and contact details. Should you follow up on these types of requests? Another concern is around safety and prevention of violence. How should you handle potentially threatening language in text responses? Fortunately, we have never personally had to deal with employees making threats in their text responses, but it is an ongoing concern that we monitor closely. We recommend developing protocol before asking any open-ended questions that address three key areas of concern: (a) situations where identification of employees would be appropriate; (b) approach and access to sharing text responses broadly; (c) removal of or masking of personal names that are mentioned in text. Clear governance principles for the use of qualitative data need to be in place. It may be necessary to incorporate language into your informed consent based on your text response protocol.

References