Culture Amp

Foundation Guides
Survey Design

Formulating the right questions for your employee survey is a challenge. Even HR experts can find it daunting. Employee engagement survey questions are, after all, the most visible and memorable aspect of the survey process. What's more, they set the basis for future action. So, they are important for appearances and pivotal for practicality.

Various pressures can mean that question composition requires a deft touch. Well-meaning advisors often have their own opinions about how it should be done and differing priorities or agendas can have an impact on the questions. Often, tight timeframes make things even trickier.

The best question set is one that is customized to fit the needs of the organization. Usually, such a quality customized set of questions can be drawn from a mix of benchmarkable templates, prior surveys, and custom questions. When combined with consideration, these resources can accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of an organization.

The right person to design a set of employee engagement survey questions is the person who knows the organization and has access to the right resources to perform customization. If you have a deep understanding of your workplace culture and strategic business objectives, then you are well positioned to get started.

The challenge, then, is to understand what needs to be done and to be able to select the right resources. To simplify the process, a proven design framework can be very helpful. With the right framework and a little effective guidance, you'll be able to build a quality question set with confidence.

This short guide aims to help you understand the key principles of employee survey design. For those who are looking to start designing right now, this guide has an overview of the two most commonly used frameworks to approach question design. Get to know them both. Pick the best fit for you.

Then get started!

Key principles of question design

Regardless of the approach you take to survey question design, there are some key principles that are universally applicable.

Taking time to consider your objectives and devise a strategy is key. Rather than diving right in and having stakeholders start submitting questions for consideration, first take a step back and think about the bigger picture.

These three considerations will get you started:

- Define your outcome

- Remember that every question sends a signal

- Make sure your polling is purposeful.

Define your outcome

Before you put pen to paper or fire up your laptop, you've got to be clear about what you are trying to achieve.

Everyone who contributes to the survey process must understand exactly what is being measured and why that subject matter is relevant.

For example, everyone working on an engagement survey should know:

- what employee engagement is

- why measuring employee engagement is important at an organizational level.

Define the desired outcome of the employee engagement survey to make

sure everyone's on the same page. That way, everyone can approach the project with clarity from the start.

Every question sends a signal

Survey designers are often so excited to get feedback that they can forget that the survey itself is a piece of communication.

Certainly, the primary purpose of a survey is to prompt input, but its impact is more than that. A survey communicates both ways. Yes, the respondents give answers to the questions, but the survey also sends a message to the respondents. When employees read a survey, they learn which issues the organization considers to be important. Questions send a signal that their feedback on the subject will be taken into consideration in future decision making.

This can be used strategically. Indeed, an engagement survey is one of the strongest ways to send a message about what leadership teams want to prioritize and where they might see room for improvement.

It's rarely advisable to ask a question if the organization is going to be unwilling to act upon the information that is gathered.

Purposeful polling

When designing a survey, people often wonder how many questions they should include. There's no hard and fast rule for an optimum number of questions – it will depend on the amount of feedback you want.

Rather than worrying about a magical optimum number, rigorously hone the survey to target desired outcomes.

Each question you ask should serve a purpose

If a question is unnecessary, strike it off. Employees' time is precious, so make sure they spend it on things that have the potential to generate an actionable outcome.

Not every question needs to be tied to a specific action, but it should relate to a concept that the organization is willing to act upon. That way, if responses identify an area of improvement, the organization stands ready to use the data to make things better.

Each question should be able to contribute to the diagnosis of an issue, the evaluation of an opportunity, or the exploration of an alternative. If it doesn't, then we need to ask: is this question necessary?

Choose the right approach

There are two separate approaches to designing survey questions:

– The Benchmark Approach

– The Strategic Alignment Approach

While both approaches are quite distinct – especially regarding how they start – they're both aimed at achieving similar ends.

When founded on a deep knowledge of the organization and its priorities, either approach can get you a good end result.

Just remember: these are merely frameworks, not prescriptive guides. Some flexibility is okay.

Benchmark Approach

The most common way to design an employee survey is to start with an established and robust survey template. Specialized vendors, like Culture Amp, can provide survey templates that have been validated through professional standards and broad-based application.

Survey templates of true quality will have been tested across a variety of industries, geographies, and organizational types. This repeated testing allows the survey template vendors to establish benchmarks. That's why this is called the Benchmark Approach.

Benchmarks are established averages derived from responses to standardized question sets. They give necessary context to scores; especially considering that there is natural variance in question scores (some questions tend to score higher than others).

After selecting a reliable and suitable survey template, it's often a good idea to customize the design to suit your organization's specific needs.

When surveying people for the first time, the Benchmark Approach is highly recommended. It's a simple and effective way to objectively assess organizational strengths and weaknesses. Validated survey templates and benchmarked responses make it possible to inquire about a variety of topics in a way that can meet best-practice standards.

Take care to select a trusted partner as the source of survey templates. After all, benchmarks are only as valuable as the integrity of the data that underlies them.

Strategic Alignment Approach

The Strategic Alignment approach is a little different. For this one, it's the strategic initiatives of the organization that assume a central role.

The strategic alignment approach can be summarized in four steps:

- List company objectives

- Identify one aspect of the workforce that is pivotal to each objective

- Determine a quantifiable characteristic to be the metric for that aspect

- Word survey questions to capture that metric.

When making a list of company objectives, limit your focus to between three and five of the most important ones. These may be already articulated in brand foundation documentation, or it may be possible to distill them from the company vision and/or mission statement. If neither primary source is available, ask a leader "What keeps you up at night?" and extrapolate from there.

Next, for each objective, determine which aspect of the workforce is pivotal to achieving it.

Then, figure out what insight or quantifiable characteristic can serve as a relevant metric for that aspect.

Finally, write and organize the survey to capture that metric.

By the end of the process, you should have a handful of questions for each

strategic initiative.

This approach is most appropriate for organizations going through a dramatic change in priorities or even an industry-wide shift.

Customized questions versus benchmarked wordings

To decide between a custom wording or a benchmarked question wording, ask: which wording will lead to better actionable information for the organization and its priorities?

When working from a survey template, it will almost always be worthwhile putting some effort into customization. You want question sets that genuinely suit the organization. To best achieve this, it may be necessary to remove questions, add questions and/or reword questions.

Questions that should be removed include those that:

- are inapplicable to the organization

- the organization would be unwilling to act upon

- don't align with the key principles.

Add questions that relate to unique characteristics of the organization or the specific situations that it faces. Consider what makes the organization unique and what is critical to your future success.

Often, questions from a benchmarked survey will be largely applicable to most organizations, but may be a bit off-base for some. In these cases, careful tweaks to wordings may allow the intention and practical effect of the questions to be retained while making them more on-point for the people surveyed. Of course, any tweak must be evaluated for whether it will impact on the validity of benchmarks. If the meaning of a question is tweaked

too far, it may no longer be appropriate to use it as a basis for benchmark comparisons.

Cognitive Model of Question Response

Whether employing the benchmark approach, the strategic alignment approach, or a blend of the two, the Cognitive Model of Question Response is a good way to evaluate the clarity and effectiveness of questions.

Essentially, the Cognitive Model of Question Response is a four-step framework that gives you a general idea of how easy the employee engagement survey questions are to answer.

It's a great idea to test your questions before the survey goes out.

The Cognitive Model of Question Response has four steps:

- Understand the intent of the question

- Search memory for information related to the topic

- Make a judgement about that information

- Translate that judgement into a response.

If a question is well crafted, people will go through these four steps seamlessly and effortlessly.

If the flow through these steps is less than smooth, the question should be tweaked. Think about how you could alter the wording to make the question more relevant to employees.

In some cases, you may find that people in a specific location, department, or tenure group would be unable to complete a step in the Cognitive Model of Question Response. If so, rewrite the question so that the data you

collect isn't tainted by misunderstanding.

Summary

Designing quality questions that are in sync with objectives is crucial to the effectiveness and usability of survey data.

The best person to design survey questions will have a deep understanding of organizational culture and strategic business objectives.

Typically, this person will be an HR leader within the organization. That's because they possess valuable insight into the people issues that an organization currently faces.

Regardless of who designs the questions, however, it's important to remember the three key principles before getting started. Define the desired outcome. Remember that every question sends a signal. Make sure that every question is necessary and purposeful.

Once the key principles have been checked off, consider which approach makes the most sense for you: the Benchmarking Approach or the Strategic Alignment Approach. The former can be ideal for first time surveys, while the latter can be great for organizations going through dramatic changes.

Be flexible—you may find that the approach that makes the most sense is one or the other, or a combination of the two.

Before launching a survey, give the questions a final review using the the Cognitive Model of Question Response. If a question is hard to understand or difficult to answer, give it a tweak.

Finally, don't hesitate to ask for help. There are quality employee survey platforms which will not only provide template surveys, but do the heavy

lifting when it comes to analysis and provide plenty of tips along the way.

Survey design is a unique challenge that requires forward thinking and expert guidance. Each survey should be designed in the context of a larger employee engagement program—a piece of a larger puzzle.

Culture Amp

How can we help?

We built Culture Amp, the world's most powerful employee feedback and analytics platform, so that professionals like you have the insights they need to help employees succeed at their fingertips.

www.cultureamp.com