Why aren't you getting a good response rate for your employee survey?
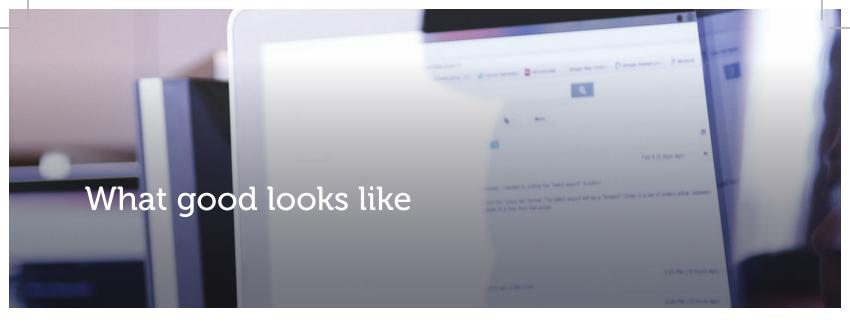
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With any survey you carry out, getting a good response rate is something of a hygiene factor. Without enough respondents, your data is less robust, less credible, and you'll have an apathetic or even hostile group, un-engaged in making any improvements.

Getting high participation can of course be easier said than done. This article explores the reasons people don't get involved in employee surveys – with simple guidance on what you can do to turn this around.
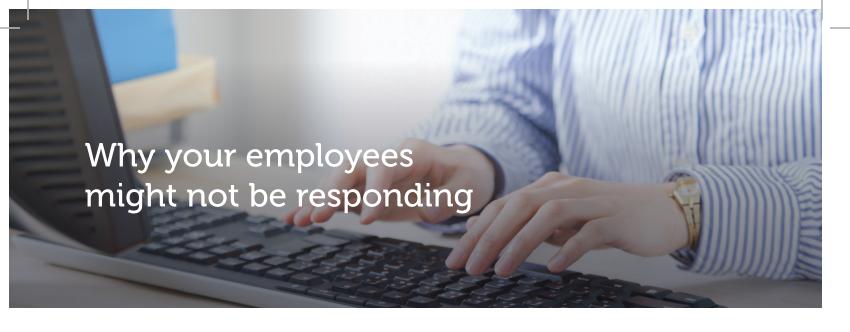
What good looks like

So what % response rate is good? At People Insight, we say anything over 70% is good, over 80% great and 90% exceptional, with a high degree of confidence in how representative and robust the results are. High response rates also mean you are likely to have enough data to dig down into team or demographic results, which is much more relevant to department and line managers. However, there are a number of organisation variables - some that are difficult to influence - that affect achievability of response rates.

Higher response rates	Lower response rates
Desk / computer-based staff	Mobile staff without internet access
Organisations where staff are clustered, close and well connected	Widely dispersed organisations, autonomous / remote workers
Small number of languages, high proportion of official language	Large variety of mother tongues, smaller proportion of employees speaking the 'official' company language
Smaller organisations	Larger organisations
Staff with role autonomy	Staff on production lines
Staff who can carry out the survey in work time	Staff expected to carry out survey in own time

However, there are many ways in which organisations can improve their own response rates, which we recommend below, based on years of survey experience with a vast range of clients.

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Why your employees might not be responding

1. They don't know about the survey

The first reason is simple – they don't know about the survey. It's low profile, poorly communicated, or communicated at a time when staff are on holiday, sick, on training courses or distracted by other scheduled activities.

What you can do about it

Pick the right time to launch your survey – avoiding school holidays, scheduled organisation activities, or the launch of other internal initiatives which may distract people. Don't launch during major events – the day your team is in the champions league final, the week Brexit actually happens etc.

Creating awareness is absolutely critical, over a number of weeks using multiple channels. This could be intranet, posters, email, social media, line manager briefings, team meetings, desk drops etc. Use whatever means people have respond to in the past, and make the communications engaging, different and stand-out. Give it long enough to get the message to disseminate; we usually recommend 2 weeks before launch.

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2. It's a pain to fill in

The last thing you want is for your people to be engaged in the idea of responding to the survey – then abandoning it because its too difficult or confusing to complete.

What you can do about it

Pick a survey provider who demonstrates great user experience and understanding of questionnaire design.

User experience (UX)

There's no excuse these days for a survey that isn't easy to navigate online, on any device, given the advanced software available.

- There should be clear yet minimal instructions as the design should be intuitive on all devices
- Responses should be easy to give with a few clicks, selections and free text entries
- A contact email or phone number should be provided by the survey vendor for queries

Questionnaire design

The questionnaire shouldn't be too long (we recommend 35-45 questions for a standard survey) and have short, clearly written, unambiguous questions (or statements) with the same response scale. Your survey vendor should be expert at the science behind writing effective questionnaires.

To make it even easier for respondents to complete, have your provide pre-load the demographics (department, length of service, age range etc) from your HR information system.

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3. There isn't time to respond

Even if you've communicated how important the survey is, avoided other internal communications and made it easy to complete, some people may feel they don't have enough time to respond. This can be more common amongst those working on production lines where they can't stop mid shift.

Also people who don't work at a computer, and are on hourly contracts may not respond well to requests delivered to their home address or personal email. They may resent being asked to complete the survey on their own time.

What you can do about it

Two weeks is usually an adequate window for responses, providing there are no other clashing events during the window. Your provider should help you monitor response rates and send reminders to encourage replies.

For those on shift or production lines, managers need to allocate a time slot for workers to complete the survey and make sure devices (computers, tablets, smartphones) are available. Instead of asking people to fill in surveys at home, invite them to complete it a local meeting with refreshments, and combine the event with useful communications and a social atmosphere.

4. They don't think it is important

If the survey has been poorly briefed, without fanfare or visible endorsement from leaders and managers, its likely to get minimal response. Additionally, if there are many requests of staff over a short period of time, and the survey request is buried amongst these, it may not hit the radar.

What you can do about it

Ensure you have a leader as the figurehead of the survey programme, communicating how important it is to the organisation. Make the communication personal and appeal to the rational and emotional.

Engage line managers and 'champions,' especially staff who like to network, in the programme before launch. Ask them to help communicate the importance of the survey and the commitment to act in their interactions with their teams.

Some organisations find it successful to create a little competition between departments – with managers encouraged to get the highest response rate in their team to win a prize or kudos. Others run a charity incentive, with a small donation given to charity for every response given. Some even give respondents the opportunity to choose the charity – another incentive to answer!

5. They don't trust it

Staff can be suspicious that their comments will be found out and attributed back to them, so decline to get involved.

What you can do about it

Reassure people about confidentiality. By having a third-party vendor run your survey, you will have the commitment from any supplier to never reveal the identity of any responders. They'll maintain minimum response numbers – even when respondents are asked multiple demographic questions (department, se, age range etc) so individuals can't be identified. Keep reassuring people about this, especially at the team level make sure there's not even an attempt to work out who said what.

6. You are asking them too often

Survey fatigue is a real thing. There's an appetite these days for 'always on' feedback, where staff are asked monthly or even weekly for their feedback. However, this can mean response rates drop below 50% with the same people saying the same things each time. It can be almost impossible to absorb weekly / monthly feedback and then make change happen before the next round of requests.

What you can do about it

Only survey at the speed you can digest the results, respond and communicate what you've done differently back to your people. Don't be swayed by what others are doing – do what is right for your organisation. It is said the people don't get survey fatigue, they get lack of action fatigue, which is a real common-sense reminder.

7. They don't think anything will happen as a result

This is an absolute killer. It can be difficult to turn around the beliefs of staff who have become apathetic about the survey process. If they've not seen change happen before because of a survey or other initiatives, they are unlikely to trust that things will be different this time.

What you can do about it

If action has been slow before, make your next iteration different. Change the branding & communications, change the figurehead, say something different. Distance the current programme from previous and communicate in earnest. It may take a few survey iterations, but once people see leaders and managers planning, committing to and delivering change in earnest, they are much more likely to invest in the process.

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How to ensure you get great response rates – a summary

Having reviewed the many reasons why people might not participate, your checklist for high response rates looks like this:

✓ **01.** Pick the right time to launch

✓ **02.** Communicate effectively beforehand

✓ **03.** Give your communications about the survey some space

✓ **04.** Have great user experience and make it really easy to complete

✓ **05.** Use incentives or competitions if right for your organisation

✓ **06.** Create time and space for all staff to complete it in 'work time'

✓ **07.** Have leaders, managers and champions help demonstrate how important participation is

✓ **08.** Ensure people believe and trust the confidentiality of their responses

✓ **09.** Only survey at the rate you can take action

✓ **10.** Commit to acting on the results

How People Insight can help

We have high standards for response rates at People Insight and regularly achieve over 80% with our clients. That's down to our focus on supporting internal communications before, during and after the survey and helping you ensure your stakeholders are engaged and mobilised.

If you want to hear more about how we can help you achieve high survey response rates, get in touch:

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