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Respondent Privacy Versus Accountability and Some Situational Considerations

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Saari and Scherbaum's (2011) excellent article inspired me to offer some perspectives gained from having in place for over a decade an identified-respondent organizational survey program. The benefits have far outweighed the costs. I will suggest additional variables to consider when deciding whether or not to utilize employee identity and will conclude with a new question to keep the conversation going.

The Decision

When we initially considered shifting to this practice, we studied the implications within a normal year's survey administration cycle. We randomly assigned half our population to be identified respondents and the other half to remain anonymous. For the identified half, we made clear to them that their identity would be attached to their survey responses and that we would keep this information confidential. We found no differences between the halves in terms of the survey results (e.g., escalation) as well as response rates. We have been on the identified-respondent path ever since and have developed and adhered to practice guidelines similar to those proposed by Saari and Scherbaum.

Our Returns

From a practical standpoint, including respondent identity in your data solves an otherwise irreconcilable survey design dilemma. It expands the range of demographic variables under consideration to the limits of your human resource information system while shortening the survey length. Shortening the survey was in fact our primary goal in deciding to eliminate anonymity. Shorter surveys produce higher participation rates, and respondent identity enables you to later add in the usual demographic suspects such as department, job code, location, and gender. This practice respects the respondent and his or her time.

Another often appreciated practical benefit is being able to continue to answer organizational questions as they arise. Gone is the assumption that your survey design must conform to an a priori set of questions. Survey results invariably lead to more questions. Having respondent identity data can often prevent the need to resurvey or wait for another year's cycle to add more demographic questions to the instrument.

As noted by Saari and Scherbaum, the longitudinal research possibilities are substantial. When we have tested the

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inferences typically drawn from a between-subjects design regarding longitudinal change, we have found them quite often to be wrong, and usually such changes in attitudes over time are moderated by other individual differences. I would categorize this practice as again respecting the respondents by rendering truth about how their attitudes and opinions change. Examples of organizational questions that can be answered include: What predicts turnover? What impact does aging have on employees' opinions? Does it have the same effect on men and women? What in the work environment is common to the employees whose satisfaction has increased the most? How does the environment interact with individual differences over time to produce higher and lower employee commitment? Assuming the program continues, the possibilities are literally infinite.

Our Costs

The costs that most would expect are lack of participation or some version of unwanted bias in the responses (to be addressed in a later section). As already mentioned, we experienced neither of these. The cost we continually experience is the regulatory responsibility placed on those who handle survey data. The data become far more sensitive, requiring additional controls to protect against their being accessed for inappropriate purposes. The conversation is ongoing regarding possible uses of the survey data and evaluating such ideas relative to the ongoing credibility of the survey program.

Why It Worked for Us and a Key Consideration

My organization is one with very low turnover. Our employees join for a career in medicine. They are high-value employees, in high demand on the labor market, and feel free to speak their minds. This is not typical, and all of the success described above may be in part due to the fact that our people are confident that their survey responses cannot have implications for their career status. Our experience may simply be unachievable in an organization in which the employees have a sense of being ''fungible.'' Employees' confidence in their employability can be assessed and should be factored into discussions of whether to eliminate survey anonymity.

A second variable to consider is the trust employees have in their management. If the culture is such that employees often do not understand management actions or speculate about management's true intentions, trust alone will not likely compel employees to respond to an identified survey. By extension, the trust employees have in the internal department or external organization charged with implementing management's commitments will be put to a similar test. Trust is something that should be carefully assessed in considering an identified employee survey strategy.

Response Bias: Compared to What?

Many of us tend to presume that employees' responses to identified surveys will be biased by their concerns about fitting in, job security, or the next raise or promotion. Why are these concerns considered biasing? Employees by definition exist in a specifically controlled environment with imposed behavioral expectations, rules and policies, and a purposely selected community of colleagues who come from different geographies and cultures, with potentially nothing in common beyond their shared work. Given this heavily biased (relative to the employees' nonwork environments) environment, it is worth asking why we seek human opinions of their workplace, unfettered by the very controls we ultimately want them to align with. Surveys often tend to be treated as psychological measures; this has historically argued for separation from organizational constraints. However surveys can just as easily be considered an organizational communication, seeking an organization-wide conversation about how employees are finding their work. If the true score is that which employees are comfortable saying with accountability for it, the bias in identified surveys diminishes.

I appreciate Saari's and Scherbaum's opening this discussion and look forward to learning much from it.

Reference

Saari, L. M., & Scherbaum, C. A. (2011). Identified employee surveys: Potential promise, perils, and professional practice guidelines. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *4*, 435–448.