White paper

A leader's guide to engagement survey results

HH Truist Leadership Institute

A leader's guide
to engagement
survey results

Your CEO has asked you to conduct an organization-wide employee engagement survey. You have compared vendors and chosen a reputable firm. The survey results indicate worktime flexibility has a strong, positive correlation with employee engagement in your organization. Your leadership decides to invest major effort and funds into an overhaul of policy and technology to enable more work flexibility. A year after the overhaul, analyses show increased flexibility has not improved employee engagement. What happened?

A different factor was more important than flexibility.

Strategy can fall flat or even backfire when survey results are misinterpreted or incomplete. To avoid costly mistakes and get the most value out of employee engagement surveys, it's crucial to understand how your provider handles several issues:

- The limitations of simple correlations and how the provider finds the rest of the story

- Which conceptualization of "engagement" is measured and the implications of it

- Whether the survey focuses on conditions, sentiments or both

- The basis for results interpretations or action recommendations

Survey provider responsibility: explain the strategy used to account for the influence of multiple variables.

The limitations of simple correlations

Incomplete information. Perhaps the most important limitation of correlational data is that a simple correlation can rarely tell the whole story (see sidebar). There are usually many, maybe dozens or hundreds, of variables at play in any work context. A simple correlation only measures the relationship between two of the variables. Other analysis tools (such as multiple regression or structural equation modeling) can better explain the influences of many variables at the same time. Those analyses will likely provide a more accurate picture of what employees are thinking and feeling.

Survey provider responsibility: describe the basis for any causal conclusions or recommendations.

Causality. Anyone who has attended an introductory science course (and most of those who haven't!) has likely heard that "correlation does not equal causation." Many survey results and the action recommendations that follow, however, are presented in terms that suggest some causal relationship.

Although a single survey can rarely establish support for any causal relationship, the research literature does include some evidence that certain engagement factors can cause changes in other factors. In addition, a provider might have some proprietary evidence for causal findings. What is important for the leader to understand is the provider's basis for causal findings or recommendations.

Correlational findings gone awry

Consider our example of the failed implementation of worktime flexibility. If a survey indicates more work flexibility is correlated with higher engagement, that correlation alone does not reveal how other variables are working. Your employees with more flexibility may feel more autonomy in their work, and the autonomy feelings are the actual cause of higher engagement. If new policies for flexibility were rolled out in a top-down, dictatorial style and included strict controls for how employee hours will be tracked, employees could actually feel less autonomy and lower engagement. The real story the survey should have told was that autonomy was more important than flexibility, and work flexibility was just one possible way to address autonomy feelings. Employee autonomy could have been enhanced with a simpler, less costly intervention, which would actually have been more effective for improving engagement.

Figure 2. Three ways to depict a simple correlation between autonomy feelings and engagement.
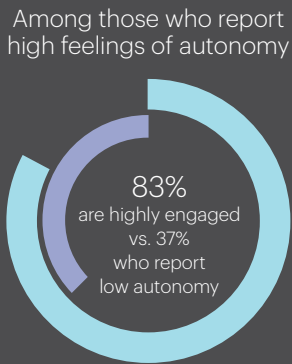
Among those who report high feelings of autonomy

83% are highly engaged vs. 37% who report low autonomy

Figure 2.1

Low autonomy

High autonomy

Employees who feel highly autonomous are 2x more likely to be engaged

Figure 2.2

Correlations between drivers and engagement
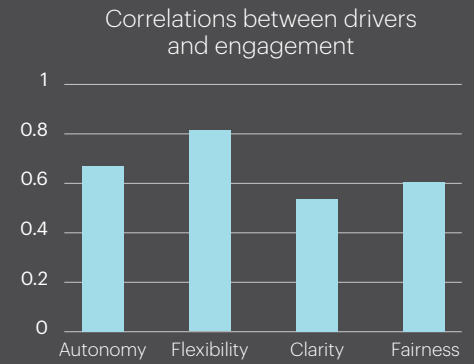
| | Autonomy | Flexibility | Clarity | Fairness |

Figure 2.3

Survey provider responsibility: explain whether any graphical result is a simple correlation, and if not, how provider accounted for other variables.

Multiple report formats. Although graphics can be arranged in many ways that help interpret findings, it's important to recognize when the underlying result is a simple correlation. To illustrate, Figure 2 shows three ways to present a correlation between autonomy and engagement.

Graphics and descriptions like these can be accurate and very informative if they are appropriately prepared. For example, if all other variables are taken into account, Figures 2.1 and 2.2 can be a great way to understand the implications of high vs. low autonomy, and Figure 2.3 can be an effective depiction of the relative importance of a group of variables.

No matter what a graphic seems to imply, however, if the underlying result is a simple correlation, the limitations remain the same. No causality can be inferred, and the story is likely incomplete.

Survey provider responsibility: provide their definition of engagement, including how they measure it, its expected downstream outcomes and the evidence to support their approach.

The definition of engagement itself

Interestingly, among practitioners there is a wide variety of views on what employee engagement actually is. How it is defined should determine how it is measured on a survey, which in turn has important implications for any findings.

There is general consensus among researchers that engagement is qualitatively different than job satisfaction or organizational commitment (two other concepts that are sometimes called engagement).

A clear definition of what is measured, and the implications, is vital to your survey results.

Survey provider responsibility: use a broad base of science and practical experience to drive real results from survey findings.

Conditions vs. sentiments

Employee engagement surveys differ in their focus on actual workplace conditions vs. employee perceptions, feelings or motivations (which can collectively be referred to as sentiments). Understanding the difference is important for getting clear, interpretable and actionable results.

Measuring actual conditions can diagnose the management practices in different departments or gather information about employees' understanding of policies or programs. This type of tactical intelligence is sometimes included in employee surveys.

The central benefit of surveys that focus on employee sentiments is more than 130 years of psychological research. This research has uncovered many basic properties of human thought, emotion and motivation, and it has established some sentiments, feelings and motivations that affect engagement levels. If a survey does not measure sentiments, these insights cannot be directly brought to bear on your results.

Survey provider responsibility: explain what their survey is designed to measure and how that design supports the value of the findings.

Basis of expertise

There are two general sources of data upon which survey providers base their professional expertise. One is scientific data generally generated from academic research projects. The other is proprietary data, generated from a firm's own work with clients in the field or in-house research projects. Both have advantages and limitations.

Many engagement survey providers say they have unique, cutting-edge insights into engagement. What is important for the consumer to understand in this case is how a provider comes to their proprietary insights. If proprietary research data is not informed by well-established academic findings, it could simply be rehashing old knowledge or worse, it could be generating fundamentally flawed results.

On the other hand, a provider whose approach is grounded exclusively in academic data might find it hard to translate results into action. An inexperienced practitioner might lack the agility to adapt valuable scientific findings to the actual production floor (literally or figuratively). Further, when something goes wrong, research papers might not have any guidance on how to handle it. An experienced provider will have faced operational limitations to the actions that might be taken in response to survey results.

In a marketplace crowded with engagement products and consulting providers, a wise consumer can make the difference between realizing positive business outcomes and costly mistakes.

Truist Leadership Institute

During the past half-century, Truist Leadership Institute, and its predecessor firm Farr Associates, have developed and refined approaches to business leadership through collaborative work with clients throughout the United States. The Truist Leadership Institute provides organizations with a leadership development partner who helps create dynamic and effective leaders, increase employee retention and improve the bottom line.