



Employee Engagement & Satisfaction Surveys: Implications of High Response Rates & Tips for Increasing Participation

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Over the past decades, human resource professionals and consultants have grappled with the issue of survey validity based on low response rates. In healthcare, we often consider rates of 30 or 40% on patient satisfaction surveys to be high rates of participation. A 30 or 40% response rate on an employee satisfaction survey, however, is a potential disaster. While academic practitioners have repeatedly reinforced that a 30% response rate is the minimum acceptable response rate to assure validity of a survey, practitioners, HR professionals, and line leaders know results with such a low response rate can be very misleading and using them can be counterproductive. A response rate of less than 60% is concerning (1) when results may not accurately reflect the voices of all employees, especially where there is wide variability of satisfaction across areas of the organization, or (2) when certain subgroups have responded to the organization at higher rates than others. For example, a survey might have a response rate of 70% but, if only 20% of RNs responded, the data may inaccurately portray the attitudes of this subgroup. This could critically impact quality and care and patient satisfaction ratings. The second major concern when participation is below 60% is that participation and honesty action planning scores may be low as well.

What is a "Good" Response Rate?

When conducting employee surveys, it is important to aim for a high response rate so one can be sure the results reflect the attitudes of the entire organization. Response rates for employee attitude surveys vary widely. The majority of survey research indicates that if response rates are under 50%, there is a good chance that those who respond to the survey are different to those who do not respond; thus, compromising the validity of the results. Thus, organizations should attempt to obtain response rates over 50%; however, obviously, the higher the results, the more valid the data. **Our average response rate is 70%, but it is not uncommon for our clients to obtain rates in the 90's.**

Who is Most Likely to Respond to the Employee Survey?

Research on the theory of commitment indicates the strongest predictor of response rates is the strength of the relationship between the employee and the organization; thus, organizations that establish and maintain high levels of trust with their employees often see

higher response rates. Commitment requires the employee has been involved in the pursuit of at least one common goal across time. Commitment to the organization is likely to increase the response rate when the participant recognizes responding is necessary and their decision to respond to the survey has consequences for other activities and interests that are not necessarily related to survey participation.

Is There a Relationship between Satisfaction/Engagement Surveys and Response Rate?

There is a significant positive correlation between response rates and satisfaction score. Our data clearly indicates as the response rate increases, the satisfaction increases. That is, the least satisfied people, or those with specific issues, tend to respond first. We have found significant positive correlations between the response rate and scores of the following work categories of our employee engagement and satisfaction surveys: Patient Safety, Quality, Communication, Treatment, Opportunity for Advancement, Compensation, Organization Mission & Goals, Work Pressures, Job Security, Rewards & Recognition, and Physician Relations.

Tips for Increasing Survey Participation

Pre-Survey Communication

To obtain a high response rate and motivate employees to participate in the survey, it is vital to inform employees about the purpose of the survey and the importance of responding. Employees will be more likely to respond if you explain how the results will be used and how employees will benefit from the survey. It is also important to clearly communicate the phases in the survey process, such as when the survey will be administered, and when the results will be shared.

Creating a communication plan for your organization is the first step in the survey communication process. The communication methods you use should depend upon how your organization communicates important matters to the entire employee base. Multiple methods should be used if possible.

Below are suggested strategies to promote communication:

- ✓ Distribute a brief letter from the President/CEO to all employees regarding the survey.
- ✓ Develop a survey notice to be placed on bulletin boards throughout the organization.
- ✓ Encourage department leaders to place posters/notices throughout their department.

- ✓ Place a banner about the survey in the cafeteria.
- ✓ Include information about the survey in the newsletter.
- ✓ Develop a communication piece to be distributed to managers to help them understand all about the survey and how to communicate it to their employees.
- ✓ Have department heads/managers bring up the survey during meetings as a part of the agenda.
- ✓ Distribute surveys or web invitations to employees during “all-hands departmental meetings.” Allow employees to return paper surveys to a central collection box.
- ✓ Draft and disseminate a Q & A sheet to all managers for use in employee meetings.

Establish Confidentiality

For maximized response rates, respondents must trust the survey process and those conducting the survey. Belief in confidentiality is essential to maintaining the trust of participants and, thus, the integrity of the process. Your efforts in this area can be reinforced by the “notices” on the survey itself. Using an outside consulting firm will also increase your response rate and the candidness of responses, as employees will feel more comfortable knowing their responses are being handled by a third party.

At Sperduto & Associates, we have developed proprietary methods to protect the validity of your process, while maintaining respondent anonymity. For paper surveys, business reply envelopes are provided for employees to return surveys in the mail if they do not feel comfortable putting them in centrally located boxes throughout the facility. For the web survey, random identification numbers and passwords are generated and are not connected to particular individuals. Our instructions explain to employees that completed surveys will not be seen by anyone in the organization and will be combined with other employee data, and that the results will be summarized in a report. All of this information is communicated to employees prior to survey administration.

Incentives

Be sure to offer both individual and group incentives that correspond to the culture in your organization. An example of team incentives includes pizza parties for groups with the highest response rates or those who exceed the desired participation goal. Ideas for individual incentives include random drawings for prizes. [Sperduto and Associates provides a kit to assist leaders in developing an incentive plan.](#)

Establish Clear Deadlines

Establish clear deadlines for completing the survey, and make sure these deadlines are properly communicated to employees. Consider tying the deadlines to the incentives. For example, provide incentives to all employees or departments that complete their surveys in the first 48 hours of survey administration.

Set Realistic Goals

Establish an overall response rate goal, and give all employees an extra incentive if that goal is reached. Communicate it frequently and create audio-visuals such as a response rate “thermometer”.

Highlight Recent Positive Changes

Before administering the survey, it is important to recognize and celebrate positive change and improvements. One month before the survey, distribute an “Accomplishment List” of actions taken based on the last survey. Be sure this is not presented too close to the time of survey administration, or it may be seen as propaganda. One month prior to survey administrations will give employees time to process the information and to see the validity of changes.

Give Periodic Updates

Let employees know how many people have responded at various points in time using the response rate thermometer. Send a reminder email out to employees, especially departments with particularly low response rates.

Give Employees Time to Complete the Survey

If desired, make it clear the survey can be completed on company time, and make sure management is aware of and supportive of this. For best results, surveys should be administered early in the day and should remain open for approximately seven to ten days. Make sure employees working all shifts are able to complete the survey on company time.

Endorsement and Motivation of Leadership

It is vital to emphasize to your leaders the importance of encouraging participation. If leaders do not stress the importance of the survey, their employees may not respond. It is suggested the CEO or a member of senior leadership sends a letter or conducts a meeting for all employees. This will show the survey is endorsed by top management.

Act on the Results

If the results are not communicated company-wide, this will greatly affect participation in future surveys. In fact, results indicate that, if an employee feedback meeting is not held, the organization’s ability to effect change can be reduced by as much as 50%. Make sure results are broken down into meaningful units so that action plans can be developed. Make sure leaders follow through with promises made in regards to the survey and that respondents are thanked for completing the survey.

Follow-up and Rewards

Not only should initial action plans be developed after the results are distributed, but 90-day action plans should also be developed. Processes should be reviewed periodically, and leaders should be held accountable for their results. If this does not occur, leaders and employees will feel the survey was simply a waste of time and resources.