

Case study



Measuring staff attitudes: a case study on the impact of Acas' employee feedback survey tool

This case study looks at one organisation's experience of using Acas' 'Employee Feedback Survey Tool' – an employee attitude survey for measuring people's views about different aspects of their job and the nature of their employment relationships, overseen by an Acas adviser. These are run as part of a wider Workplace Project service that Acas offer, to improve employment relations within workplaces by involving employers and employee representatives in joint problem solving and joint working.

The case study considers all aspects of the process and presents the views of the lead person who commissioned this work and the Acas adviser who delivered it.

Introduction

The case study organisation is a registered Scottish charity that supports a national network of advisory bodies. The organisation recognises a trade union and employs around 130 people who work across these various functions.

During 2014/15, the organisation underwent a period of significant change and relative instability. Given the resulting impact that this had on employees, combined with the fact that it had been some years since the organisation had last rolled-out an employee engagement survey, there was a desire among Senior Management and HR personnel to undertake an all-staff survey. In doing this, they hoped to achieve the following:

1. Measure employee engagement.
2. Gather specific feedback on issues the organisation was facing at the time.
3. Gain insight into how the organisation could invest in and improve employee wellbeing.

Approach to carrying out the work

After carrying out some initial research on the different approaches and methods for measuring employee engagement, the Head of HR approached Acas to find out more about their Employee Feedback Survey, and ultimately asked them to work with their organisation to deliver this service. There was a desire within the organisation to improve workplace relations and to address what was perceived to be a lack of staff trust in the Senior Management Team (SMT) and Board. The organisation was keen to use an external provider to administer the survey to show that they were invested in the process, help build the trust of employees and guarantee anonymity:

"If we'd done the survey in-house, HR would obviously have had to collate all the individual responses in order to produce the output report. We wanted to ensure



that there was complete trust in the process and guaranteed anonymity for everyone in completing the survey, and doing it through Acas was the best way to reassure staff that this was the case.”

Head of HR

Acas in particular were chosen because of their reputation for fairness and objectivity, which was felt to be particularly important for a survey of this nature as it was recognised that people sometimes have an inherent nervousness about staff surveys and what they are trying to achieve. The Acas Employee Feedback Survey Tool was felt to be helpful in this regard since it goes beyond just survey administration; an Acas adviser oversees the entire process, introduces it to staff and helps to frame its purpose, and then interpret the resulting findings. Initial contact was made using the online submission form on the Acas website and from there an Acas adviser called back directly.

There was a positive response to the decision to carry out the survey from both management and the trade union at the organisation. Overall the response from employees was positive, however there were also some initial concerns around anonymity. These were addressed by the Acas adviser at an initial meeting where he gave a presentation to all staff explaining what the Employee Feedback Survey Tool is, why the organisation was doing it and what would happen with the results. The organisation was also able to reassure employees that they could be honest in their responses by explaining that these would be routed directly to an independent research agency working on behalf of Acas, and that anything that could potentially identify someone would not be included in the report, so nobody within the organisation would ever see it.

The process of rolling out the Employee Feedback Survey

The work commenced within 2-4 weeks of contacting Acas. Having an Acas adviser to oversee and guide the process, keep it on track and reiterate important technical points was felt to be a major advantage of the service. Specific advantages identified included:

- Setting out a detailed timeline of what needed to be done and when;
- Giving the organisation an overview of the whole process, including follow-up work;
- Supporting the organisation at the initial stages of the process by meeting staff and explaining the nature of the survey to them from an impartial perspective;
- Being available to talk on the phone throughout the process;
- Advising on and helping with follow-up work after the survey had closed and the report received; and
- Attending and contributing to the final SMT meeting where an action plan for going forwards was agreed.

It was predominantly the HR team who worked with the Acas adviser during the set-up and roll-out of the survey, on tasks such as tailoring the questionnaire to meet the needs of the organisation, agreeing timescales and leading on follow-up work. HR also kept all staff (including union reps and the SMT) informed about the process, including: the reasons for carrying out the work; ensuring staff were aware of when the survey would go live; sharing the findings, and; keeping staff updated on what was being done in response to their feedback.

The Head of HR was pleased with the efficiency of the process of agreeing and



implementing project timescales, including the set-up and roll-out of the survey. The survey went live in March 2016, with a link to the survey sent out by email to all staff along with a few paper copies being posted to anyone not currently office-based, for example those on maternity leave. It was set to close three weeks later. The survey took 10-15 minutes to complete and three reminders were sent out by the organisation's HR team. At the initial closing date the response rate was good, but it was decided to extend the survey by another week in order to gain more responses. Ultimately a response rate of 82 per cent was achieved, which can be considered high for a survey of this kind.

Results, follow-up work and outcomes

A draft interpretive report of the survey findings, including a range of sub-group analysis, was sent to HR two weeks after the survey closed, with the final report produced two weeks after this. The final report was shared with the SMT and the Board and emailed to all staff. The Head of HR felt that on the whole the organisation was very satisfied with this output. Although the report raised some areas of concern, it also highlighted positive areas, and as a result it enabled the organisation to identify the areas that were satisfactory, and others where action needed to be taken. It was felt that in general the results in the report accurately reflected the state of the organisation at the time.

The results suggested that staff had felt comfortable to fully express their views when responding to the survey. After familiarising themselves with the findings, the HR team, acting on the advice of Acas, organised two follow-up focus groups with a small number of staff members, including union representatives. The focus groups were Acas-moderated and aimed to drill down and get more in-depth qualitative detail to back up the survey findings and gain a fuller understanding of what they meant.

"I always make it clear from the start that the most important thing with the survey is what the organisation does afterwards and that they have the buy-in from the senior management team at the start to follow up and action the results..."

Acas adviser

The Acas adviser worked with members of the HR team to prepare these sessions and agree key areas from the survey findings to focus on. This included: ways of improving the recognition and reward of employees; development prospects and the structure for identifying training needs; trust and communication between senior management, the Board and employees, and; how change is managed in the organisation. The focus groups were facilitated by Acas and notes were taken by the organisation's HR Adviser. A summary report of the findings, including comments and suggestions made by attendees, was produced by the organisation and presented at the next SMT meeting, which the Acas adviser also attended to help identify appropriate action points. From there an action plan was drawn up. Once this had been finalised another communications email was sent to all staff explaining what the SMT were planning to do as a result of their feedback and that staff would be kept regularly updated with how this work was progressing.

"...from the discussions I'd had with [the Acas adviser], I knew that he would do a little bit of work with us afterwards to help identify the key actions based on the survey results... he actually attended one of our senior management team meetings to work through the summary results with us and help us identify an action plan... the adviser's attendance at that SMT meeting was really valuable and he definitely



made useful and insightful contributions.”

Head of HR

A number of key actions emerged as a result of this work, which the organisation set out to address. Some of these actions were able to be achieved relatively quickly and act as ‘quick wins’, such as clarifying the process for staff to access the funds for training and development, whilst others would be longer term in nature. Some of the longer term actions involved reviewing the package of non-salary related benefits on offer to staff, and improving communications from the Senior Management Team.

“Real progress has been made against all of the actions that we identified, and staff are being kept up to date on progress by reminding them what they said, what action has been taken, and what actions still lie ahead...”

Head of HR

Conclusion

The organisation intends to continue this work to ensure ongoing engagement with staff and plans to roll out regular staff engagement surveys, possibly biennially. The Head of HR felt that the professional and impartial running of the survey process by Acas will help any future process to run more smoothly, even if it was to be done in-house. They would also highly recommend the Acas Employee Feedback Survey Tool to other organisations or professionals considering undertaking a staff engagement survey:

“I don’t think there are any disadvantages to doing it apart from the cost, but ... for us to have delivered the same service in-house, the resource from the HR team that would have been required to set out the questions, do a survey, get the results in, produce analysis, etc., would have ended up costing a similar amount anyway, and in this case we had all the benefits of having an impartial and credible third party do that for us, provide a professional report and analysis, and ensure everyone’s responses were totally confidential.”

Head of HR



Key learning points

- Commissioning an external provider to carry out the survey helped staff feel reassured that their responses would be treated anonymously and encouraged candour in their answers. It also demonstrated that the organisation was invested in the survey and were taking it seriously.
- Having an experienced and expert adviser to oversee the project was advantageous for keeping the project on track, to time, and to emphasise key stages in the process.
- Having buy-in from the whole organisation from the beginning and proactively carrying out follow-up work once the results were obtained was pivotal to ensuring a successful outcome.
- Regular and effective communication to all staff throughout the process including what the organisation were doing as a result of the survey findings was crucial to maintain engagement.
- The Acas Adviser's role in helping the organisation to understand and interpret the survey results and identify appropriate changes was felt to be a major factor in the effective implementation of these changes.

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