

## IN DEPTH: WORKPLACE TRENDS

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### Employee surveys can come with customized questions

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RALEIGH - Employee surveys and assessments have become as common in the workplace as 401(k) plans and the types of surveys are almost as varied as the types of funds that can make up a 401(k). Some surveys have standard questions that employees answer. Others have questions that were developed by employees and managers at the company being surveyed, and others use something called a 360-degree survey in which an employee's superiors, subordinates and peers are questioned about the employee.

Linda Leake, president of Raleigh-based Change By Leake, uses the 360-degree survey for her clients. "You really learn a lot about yourself," she says.

Leake thinks surveys are important because, "What managers and presidents don't understand is that employees have the information and the answers in the organization to move it forward," she says.

Once Leake has determined the problem and the appropriate solution, she'll either implement the changes or give the company a chance to make the changes itself. But she is adamant about her role. "I don't work with companies unless I get results," she says.

Phrantceena Halres, CEO of Aelmings Human Resources Corp. in Raleigh, began offering a survey service three years ago. "We

customize the process based on focus groups, forums and online questionnaires," she says. "We target the departments that have issues."

Halres says a lot of the survey work she does pertains to questions of diversity in the workplace. She says executives need to let their employees tell them what they believe are the needs of the company, and then "develop programs based on feedback they receive from these employees."

While she's found little resistance from top-level executives, Halres says the biggest challenge she's faced in helping companies implement solutions are budgets. In many cases, especially with smaller companies, "they've had to reallocate budgets in order to implement programs."

David Snyder, CEO of Raleigh-based Snyder Inc., says too many companies use survey questions that aren't tailored for the specific needs of that company. "When you're looking at the attributes someone brings to a job, a cookie-cutter approach, doesn't work," he says.

For example, if every employee was evaluated based on an assessment that identifies a team player or someone who thinks inside the box, many of the world's top executives would never get hired, he says.

To avoid such a narrow approach, Snyder says the best questions come from inside the company. "A lot of companies have the talent in-house to design these surveys. And there are some companies that ask questions that are meaningful," he says. "They spend the time to come up with specific questions of their employees and then use the results.

It's better to design your own questions that are connected to the problems you want to study," he adds.

If a company needs to use an outside survey firm or consultant, Snyder recommends first having a "face-to-face with someone who is familiar with your industry."

And the survey should only be a part of an evolving process, he stresses. "I don't use any survey for anything more than a conversation piece." Once company executives have the answers to their questions, that's the time to open the channels of communication, he says.

Snyder, who authored the book *How to Mind Read Your Customers*, works in conjunction with Richard Boren, owner of The Training Registry in Raleigh, to provide companies with help in designing employee surveys and assessments. He also is currently working as a business development counselor for Headway Corporate Resources, developing a series of surveys that will be used in screening job candidates.

These customized surveys will become part of Headway's nine-step process used for matching the right job-seeker to the right employer, says Teresa Spangler, Headway's vice president of strategic initiatives.

#### **LEADING BY EXAMPLE**

Rich Podurgal, group vice president of organization and people development at The Constella Group in Durham, says his company has been conducting employee surveys every 18 months for the last five years.

The first survey was conducted by an outside firm, he says, but now they're administered in-house over the company's intranet. Employees seem to feel comfortable about their anonymity. "One of the questions we ask is 'Do you feel you can answer these questions honestly?' Eighty-six percent say yes."

The survey consists of 72 questions covering 11 categories. The president of each business group gets the report pertinent to that group. "Then we have a discussion," says Podurgal. "Someone from OPD (office of people development) sits in on the meeting and then we put together a team of employees that feel passionate about an issue."

The first surveys dealt with specific issues such as the desire for more employee activities, more employee training and employee recognition programs. "Most of those quick fixes are done," Podurgal notes.

Employees can also submit written comments. "We got about 2,000 this year," he says.

The company also uses the 360-degree survey, but only for upper-level management, Podurgal says. "And it's not used for evaluation, but only for development," he says.

Raleigh-based Alphanumeric Systems Inc. conducts online employee surveys to determine whether the company is on the right track.

Steve Chase, executive vice president, says the surveys can indicate "what can be improved and what is working well."

Alphanumeric works with Change By Leake, but developed most of the questions in-house. Chase also notes: "We do personality and trait assessments prior to hiring." In addition, all employees who leave the company are given an exit interview, he says.

Chase says that survey results can shine a light on more than an organization's problems. "What we've learned is there's not always a problem," he says. "One out of 300 is definitely not a problem. If it's 30 out of 300, there may be a problem."

"The process is healthy because it offers feedback," he says. "It's healthy whether it's good information or information that shows us there's things we have to improve."