

Employee Attitude Surveys in the United States

Évaluation des attitudes du personnel dans les entreprises américaines

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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I

During the past twenty years and especially in the last decade, employee attitude surveys have been widely employed in American industry and in many firms have become a standard operating procedure. Where the survey technique has been employed with an understanding of employee attitudes and motivations it has been found a successful and constructive approach to management problems in human relations. Where it has been blindly applied in a mechanical fashion, it has been found to be a frustrating experience for both management and employees.

Typically, an employee attitude survey is conducted through an anonymous questionnaire, consisting of a series of questions about various aspects of the work environment. For each question asked, there are several answer provided, graded from unfavorable to favorable. The employee simply checks the answer coming closest to his own opinion and thus provides a reasonably accurate measure of the way he feels about different aspects of the work. Usually, the results are broken down by employee groups, that is, by departments,

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length of service, skill level, and sex. In this way, it is possible to compare the responses of the various employee groups in the organization and obtain some idea of their satisfactions and dissatisfactions.

In most employee attitude surveys, elaborate steps are taken to insure the anonymity of employees. Very frequently, surveys are conducted by outside agencies, such as universities or management consultants, in order to guarantee to employees that no one in the company will see the individual questionnaires. A common prop used in these surveys is the locked ballot box, which universally symbolizes the idea of the secret ballot. Thus, employee attitude surveys in the United States are tied in with the right of the individual to vote as his conscience directs him, fully confident that there will be no interference with this inalienable right. The validity of the survey, in fact, depends on the honesty and sincerity of employees. It seems very possible that employee attitude surveys can be utilized only where there is a strong tradition of the right of the individual to think independently and according to the dictates of his personal feelings and interests.

The technique of conducting questionnaire surveys is simple, uncomplicated, and, therefore, easily understood. It has appealed to American management especially because of its seemingly direct approach to employee relations problems. Indeed, it makes good sense to find out what the attitudes and problems of employees are simply by asking them. However, because of the simplicity of the questionnaire survey technique, surveys have frequently been used without sufficient understanding of the significance of employee opinions and the factors influencing them. In order to avoid any such mistake here, we should like to devote our attention briefly to the assumptions and basic concepts underlying the use of questionnaires as a device for measuring and studying employee attitudes.

II

A questionnaire is fundamentally an artificial way of determining the employee's more or less consistent views of his work situation and employee a series of questions about his job and work situation as though he thought of his work environment in bits and pieces rather than as a totality. The typical attitude questionnaire fragmentalizes the employee's more or less consistent views of his work situation and reduces his broader, more complex attitudes to a series of specific, see-

mingly unrelated opinions about the job, working conditions, supervision, and so on.

The employee generally does not view the work environment in the way in which a questionnaire usually presents his views, that is, as a set of distinct and separate opinions. He is not a hedonistic calculating machine who registers plus one for every specific satisfaction that he gains from the work environment and minus one for each dissatisfaction. His specific views as expressed through the questionnaire are but fragments of broader, more complex patterns of attitudes.

It should be kept in mind also that the opinions expressed by employees through the questionnaire are in the language of the questionnaire and not necessarily in the language of employees. It is a common mistake in using questionnaires to assume that the responses of employees actually are the way employees are talking about their work environment. Employees in fact must force their views to fit the language and the mold provided by the questions or items included in the questionnaire. Because of this, a questionnaire which is poorly designed or limited in scope can distort and garble the opinions of employees. Rather than revealing the attitudes of employees, it veils and confuses them. At the very worst, management can be led to believe that certain problems exist among employees where no such problems exist at all. Questionnaires for example that place a great deal of emphasis on the quality of first level supervision tend to over-emphasize the importance and significance of supervision in creating morale problems among employees.

It is apparent, then, that the first problem in using questionnaires is one of determining what employees are really trying to say through the questionnaire. It must be understood at the outset that the questionnaire results are some what artificial and that it is the job of the interpreter to reconstruct from the opinions expressed by employees what they actually say and think about the work environment. This can be done only if the questionnaire is properly designed, that is, provides the employee with a reasonably complete set of questions or items, worded in the language used by employees, through which they can adequately express their feelings and opinions about the work environment. But in addition to the adequacy of the questionnaire's design and content, there must also be a technique or at least a rationale by which the opinions expressed by employees can be put together

into the patterns of attitudes which more typically reflect the way they think and talk about the work environment.

Assuming that the questionnaire is properly designed and does provide a way of studying the complexes or patterns of attitudes expressed by employees, we face still another consideration in using questionnaires as a device for assessing the problems of employees. The questionnaire results may tell you how employees talk about various aspects of the work environment but do not necessarily tell you why. The way employees talk about their work depends on two other factors; namely, their needs, expectations, and interests and the observed events, situations, and circumstances which occur in their work. The opinions and pattern of attitudes expressed by employees are a reflection of still more basic subjective and objective factors in the work environment. Unless this fact is clearly understood, management can easily make the mistake of assuming that those factors which employees criticize in the work environment are necessarily the direct cause of their adverse feelings. Actually, their criticisms as expressed through the questionnaire are reflections of causative factors which must be determined by further analysis of the interests of employees and the work situation as employees observe it. Attitudes are symptoms — symptoms of the interaction that exists between employees and the work environment; symptoms of the adequacy or inadequacy of the perception which employees have achieved on the job; symptoms of the degree of coordination and motivation that exists among the diverse employee groups in a company; and symptoms in the final analysis of the success of management in building and maintaining an integrated organization. Viewing employee attitudes as symptoms helps provide the conceptual tool needed to proceed from an analysis of what employees say to an evaluation of the meaning of employee attitudes with reference to the actual functioning of the organization. In this way, a questionnaire survey can open up the entire complex of administrative problems in an organization and help management to diagnose the character of the relationships that exist in the organization and the basic problems of coordination and motivation among employees.

Unfortunately, typical employee attitude surveys conducted in the United States, particularly in the past, have reflected only to a limited extent the considerations just discussed. The questionnaires utilized in many of these surveys have been limited in scope and based primarily on what management wanted to know rather than on what employees

wanted to say. In some instances, as previously mentioned, they have been heavily biased because certain factors such as supervision were given undue consideration. Few of these surveys have provided either a procedure or even a rationale for relating the opinions of employees, one with another, so that the complex of employee attitudes could be studied or interpreted. As a consequence, many management groups, after a survey, have been left with a thoroughly mixed up and incomprehensible jigsaw puzzle of statistical tables and charts. Management was supposed to be able to understand this statistical mess, having been forewarned somewhat cryptically by the survey "expert" that, even if management could not make sense out of the survey results, they meant "something" to employees.

III

In recent years, considerable progress has been made not only in the design and construction of employee attitude questionnaires but also in the proper use of surveys as tools of management. Much of this advance must be credited to the broader research in human relations in industry which marks its beginning at Western Electric, Hawthorne Works, and Harvard University and has continued for the past twenty-five years in companies, such as Sears, Roebuck and Company, and universities, such as Harvard, Chicago, Yale, Cornell, Michigan and others. It is interesting to note that the history of the development of employee attitude surveys cannot adequately be studied through reports on the actual use of such surveys in industry. The literature in the field is filled with examples of ill-conceived studies representing abortive efforts to utilize the questionnaire technique where no basic understanding of employee relations existed. Actually, the management representative interested in employee attitude surveys can best devote his time and efforts to a study of the research reports of men like Mayo, Roethlisberger, Warner, Gardner, Whyte, Bakke, Richardson, Chapple, Walker, etc., who seldom, if ever, used questionnaires in their research but relied primarily on personal interviews and field observations. All we are saying here is that the use of questionnaires as a tool of management requires a thorough understanding of human relations in industry. It requires a good deal more than the ability simply to phrase questions and answers.

The contribution of the human relations research conducted during the past twenty-five years can best be studied through a question-

naire survey developed by the Industrial Relations Center of The University of Chicago. This program represents one of several efforts in the United States to meet the deficiencies ordinarily found in questionnaire surveys. It is based on extensive field studies conducted by research groups at Sears, Roebuck and Company over a period of ten years. Three years ago, the Industrial Relations Center picked up the threads of this research, developed an instrument called the SRA Employee Inventory, and set up a human relations laboratory to continue studies on the use of this and similar instruments in industry.

The SRA Employee Inventory represents a joint effort of human relations experts, management representatives in the field, and psychometricians. It reflects not only an understanding of how people actually talk and think on the job but also a knowledge of test construction. The Inventory consists of a series of seventy-eight standard items which can be used among diverse employee groups in a variety of industrial settings. These were chosen from extensive interview material conducted among employees in many different organizations over a period of several years. They reflect the way employees actually talk about their jobs and as such make it easier for employees to fit their opinions and ideas to the language and form of the questionnaire. The Inventory is designed to help employees say what they think, not to answer questions which management may regard as important.

Because the SRA Employee Inventory is a standard questionnaire used in offices, factories, retail stores, and warehouses it has been possible to gather norms against which the results in a particular organization can be compared. Such comparative data is invaluable in studying the meaning and significance of employee reactions. Attitudes and feelings are relative and can best be understood on a comparative basis.

Perhaps, the major contribution of the SRA Employee Inventory is the technique and rationale it provides for piecing together the different opinions expressed by employees into the complex of attitudes which more typically characterize the way employees talk about the work environment. This is accomplished through the use of profiles which permit the interpreter to observe at a glance the general level of morale and the pattern of attitudes characterizing the group.

The Inventory is more than a questionnaire and more than a survey. It is a management program. Management and supervisors are

trained to interpret and use the results. They are not left in the usual statistical stew but provided with a step-by-step procedure for analyzing the significant scores and understanding the attitudes of their employees. The Inventory program is basically an executive and supervisory training program. It provides management at all levels with a measure of the success of management in coordinating and motivating employees in the accomplishment of the tasks of the organization.

Examples of the use of the Inventory survey are difficult to provide because each survey opens up a large portion of the administrative problems of an organization. As a consequence, there is no pat, neat case material which adequately describes the scope of the results provided by a survey of this type. The Industrial Relations Center has conducted surveys in the airlines industry, meat packing industry, retailing, railroads, manufacturing groups of all types and descriptions. Each has shown problems which run the gamut of organizational and administrative deficiencies at all levels. However, certain observations can be made which reveal a few of the more general findings.

IV

Of primary importance is the fact that employee morale in the United States, if measured by the degree of enthusiasm and motivation shown, is not aboundingly high. This judgment of course is based on American standards since we have no comparisons that can be made with other countries. Our studies would appear to indicate that at least one-third of the American work group is somewhat indifferent and apathetic about their work and relations with the company. Only about one-third are highly motivated and enjoy strong positive satisfactions on the job. This trend may be typical of highly industrialized countries where many people are employed on routine work with little or no participation in the organization beyond operating a machine in the production line, performing a simple task of assembly, or transporting materials or work in process.

Technical employees in the United States, particularly research workers and engineers, show a degree of frustration which is surprising in light of the presumed technical values of mass production industry. This group finds itself enmeshed in the same web that has trapped production workers generally. They are too specialized to participate in the broader processes of administration.

Unionized employees tend to show a greater degree of satisfaction with pay and security than other factors in the work environment. There are strong indications, although this has not been thoroughly documented, that the major contribution of the typical union to work satisfaction is in these two areas of pay and security. Other factors in the work environment are being satisfied for the most part neither by management nor by union leadership. The basic problems of worker integration and participation are "up for grabs".

Production workers in industry show a characteristic pattern of attitudes which describes quite accurately in our opinion the work environment to which they must adjust. They typically show a lack of interest in the organization as a whole. They tend to be more self-oriented than other employees. They feel under pressure on the job and, in spite of the universal efforts of production workers to limit work effort through restriction of output, they feel overworked. Attitudes toward fellow workers suggest a lack of integration either at the work level or at the social level. Their most favorable attitudes are toward the pay and yet this is the main element of the work environment about which they complain most vigorously.

It is interesting to note that, where office employees are organized on a production basis, they show the same pattern of attitudes as production workers in the factory. Again, we find the same lack of social and work-effort integration, the same lack of organization orientation, and the same "economic" attitudes. Money becomes the all important factor. The attitude toward the work and company is built on the simple equation of so much work for so much money with no participation beyond that. Employees actually take on some of the characteristics of the "rabble" described by Elton Mayo which in the views of the classical economists is motivated to cooperate and work only by the "rational" desire for money.

Morale varies from industry to industry and apparently is strongly influenced by the character and reputation of the industry in the general community. Workers in high status industries tend to have higher morale. For example, the airlines industry which is new, dramatic, and dynamic generates more enthusiasm and motivation among employees at all levels than the meat packing industry or food processing industry which are regarded by employees as the "slaughter-house" and the "cannery" respectively. The general reputation that a company has developed through years of good, sound employee relations practices

and policies tends to develop higher employee morale. It becomes known as a "good place to work" both within and outside the organization. Employees tend to regard their problems as specific to their own department or work group and maintain strong positive attitudes about the company in general. In short, they tend to localize their difficulties rather than generalize them which is typical of low morale employees.

Within a company, morale is closely related to the status of employees, such as executives, supervisors, staff personnel, and high rated white, collar and factory workers, have more positive attitudes than lower status employees, such as maids and porters, material handlers, routine production workers, and shipping and receiving employees. This trend by no means indicates that only high status employees can enjoy high morale. There are many instance in the surveys that have been conducted by The University of Chicago where lower status personnel have shown very favorable attitudes toward the job and company. In all these cases, however, employees either through the conscious effort of management or, more usually, through a special set of "natural" circumstances, have enjoyed prestige, recognition, sense of individuality, and a broader sense of participation in the affairs of the organization. In short, wherever certain benefits, privileges, and feelings of worthwhileness accrue to employees, their attitudes toward the organization which has provided those benefits improve. Typically, the status system of an organization is a measure of the way material, psychological, and social benefits are more or less naturally distributed. Our surveys demonstrate clearly that there is no reason why some of these benefits cannot be disbursed more generally throughout the organization if management becomes consciously aware of the basic social and psychological needs of people.

CONCLUSION

Our research has shown that attitude questionnaires can be used as an important management tool, indeed one of the most important management tools in evaluating and assessing the functioning of an organization. In some ways, the measure of coordination and motivation provided by a well-designed and carefully constructed attitude questionnaire survey is more significant to management than the measure of organizational effectiveness provided by the profit and loss

statement since it directs attention to the basic problems of management in developing and maintaining an effective organization. A questionnaire survey is only valuable to the extent that it is used properly and with a thorough understanding of its use and function in assessing the problems of an organization. If it is not based on an adequate conceptualization and knowledge of human relations in industry, it becomes a simple exercise in democratic voting procedure and little more.

SOMMAIRE

EVALUATION DES ATTITUDES DU PERSONNEL DANS LES ENTREPRISES AMERICAINES

I

Un relevé des attitudes d'un groupe d'employés s'effectue au moyen d'un questionnaire anonyme, comprenant une série de questions concernant divers aspects du milieu de travail. L'employé n'a qu'à souscrire à la réponse (variant de défavorable à favorable) qui se rapproche le plus de son opinion, fournissant ainsi une mesure raisonnablement juste de ce qu'il pense des différents aspects de son travail; les résultats sont généralement classés par groupes d'employés (par département, sexe, habileté, etc.)

Des mesures sont prises pour assurer à ces enquêtes un caractère secret et conserver l'anonymat des employés; ainsi, très souvent des agences extérieures, telles les universités ou les Conseils d'industrie, en sont chargées. Leur validité dépend, en dernière analyse, de l'honnêteté et de la sincérité des employés.

II

Un questionnaire est fondamentalement un moyen artificiel de déterminer les attitudes des employés; artificiel dans le sens qu'il pose à l'employé une série de questions relativement à son travail, à sa situation au travail, aux conditions de travail, à la surveillance, etc. Il ramène l'opinion globale, plus vaste et plus complexe, de l'employé à une série de vues fragmentaires; de plus, les opinions émises sont exprimées dans le langage du questionnaire, et non nécessairement dans celui des employés. Souvent, au lieu de les révéler clairement, il peut les voiler et les rendre confuses.

Il semble donc que le premier problème qui se pose quand on utilise ces questionnaires, c'est celui de déterminer ce que les employés essaient réellement d'exprimer à travers ces réponses. Ainsi, alors qu'un questionnaire peut laisser savoir ce que les employés pensent de leur milieu de travail, il ne dit pas pourquoi nécessairement ils pensent ainsi. Les attitudes sont des symptômes — symptômes de l'interaction qui existe entre les employés et leur milieu de travail; symptômes du degré de coordination et de motivation existant entre les divers groupes d'employés dans une compagnie, symptômes dans l'analyse finale de la réussite de la direction à édifier et maintenir une organisation intégrée, etc. De cette façon, un questionnaire d'enquête peut aider considérablement la direction à prononcer un diagnostic sur le caractère des relations qui existent au sein d'une organisation et sur les problèmes fondamentaux de coordination et de motivation chez les employés.

Malheureusement, dans la plupart des expériences antérieures aux Etats-Unis, les questionnaires ont été limités dans leur envergure et leur étendue parce qu'ils étaient basés tout d'abord sur ce que la gérance voulait savoir plutôt que sur ce que les employés voulaient dire. De plus, plusieurs ont fortement dévié de leur objectif parce qu'une trop grande considération avait été accordée à certains facteurs, tels la surveillance (supervision).

III

Au cours de ces dernières années, un progrès notoire a été effectué non seulement dans l'élaboration de tels questionnaires, mais aussi dans l'utilisation appropriée de ces enquêtes comme instruments pour la gérance. Une grande partie de ce crédit est attribuée aux patientes recherches entreprises dans le domaine des relations humaines dans l'industrie, à la Western Electric (Hawthorne Works), à Sears, Roebuck and Company, et dans les universités telles que Harvard, Chicago, Yale, Cornell, Michigan et autres. Entre autres, le Centre de Relations Industrielles de l'Université de Chicago, a contribué largement à ces recherches au moyen d'études élaborées par des groupes chez Sears, Roebuck, s'étendant sur une période de dix ans. Il y a trois ans, ce Centre, au moyen de cette recherche, a réussi à développer un outil intitulé *SRA Employee Inventory* et à mettre sur pieds un laboratoire de relations humaines pour poursuivre les études sur l'utilisation de cet instrument et autres semblables dans l'industrie. Le *SRA Employee Inventory* représente un effort conjoint d'experts en relations humaines, de représentants de la gérance dans le domaine et de spécialistes en psychométrie. Cet outil a pour but d'aider les employés à dire ce qu'ils pensent et non de les faire répondre à des questions que la direction considère importantes.

Cet *Inventory* est plus qu'un questionnaire et plus qu'une enquête. C'est un programme pour la gérance; la gérance et les surveillants sont entraînés et interprètent et utilisent les résultats... pour analyser et comprendre les attitudes de leurs employés.

IV

Comme résultat, si on en juge d'après le degré d'enthousiasme et de motivation démontrés, le moral de l'employé aux Etats-Unis n'est pas particulièrement haut; les études démontrent que moins d'un tiers du groupe des travailleurs américains sont indifférents ou apathiques vis-à-vis leur travail et leurs relations avec la compagnie. Un tiers seulement ressentent une véritable satisfaction au travail; les techniciens, surtout les travailleurs en recherches et les ingénieurs, manifestent un degré de frustration surprenant, qui semble provenir d'une trop grande spécialisation; les travailleurs syndiqués semblent témoigner une plus grande satisfaction vis-à-vis leur salaire et leur sécurité que vis-à-vis d'autres facteurs; les travailleurs de la production démontrent un manque d'intérêt total; ils se sentent « sous pression ». Leur attitude est favorable vis-à-vis la paye qu'ils retirent, même s'ils s'en plaignent avec vigueur.

Il est intéressant de remarquer que là où les employés de bureau sont organisés sur une base de production, ils montrent le même ensemble d'attitudes que les travailleurs de la production. D'autre part, les travailleurs des industries haut cotées — e.g., dans l'aviation commerciale — sont enclins à jouir d'un très haut moral; il en est de même pour ceux qui travaillent pour une compagnie dont la réputation est bonne. Les études ont démontré qu'il n'y a aucune raison pour empêcher que certains avantages et privilèges ne soient pas distribués de façon plus générale dans l'industrie si la direction devient consciente des besoins sociaux et psychologiques des individus.

CONCLUSION

Les recherches de l'Université de Chicago ont prouvé que les questionnaires sur les attitudes des employés peuvent devenir, en effet, des instruments de travail des plus importants pour la gérance en lui permettant d'évaluer et d'assurer le fonctionnement d'une organisation; ils doivent être basés sur une connaissance appropriée des relations humaines dans l'industrie.