The Future of Employee Research
A Study about Employee Insight in the Digital Era

Executive Summary

The Future of Employee Research is an open-access project that uses the wisdom of crowds to generate insight about what the future may hold for this area of practice. It is, in itself, an effective demonstration of how social and digital technologies are changing the way we participate in conversations and exchange feedback about our opinions, experiences and ideas.

The field of employee research is shifting – from giving feedback behind closed doors to providing feedback in an open forum. This crucial development is making organisations slowly wake up to the realisation that static feedback mechanisms controlled by management are no longer in keeping with an increasingly social media savvy workforce.

Progressive organisations have already embraced some of the emerging technologies in employee research and the benefits are plain to see. However, many organisations are simply not yet attuned to the need for change in this area. These organisations will continue to use outdated research practices through a mixture of lack of knowledge, fear and weak leadership.

Just over half of participants believe that the traditional employee survey is dead. This is damning for the vast majority of large organisations who conduct them on a regular basis. Likewise, two-thirds think that the future in this area will be more qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, and that mobile devices will become an instrumental tool for employee voice. It is clear that relatively few organisations are currently using social technologies to gather employee feedback.

In addition to identifying participants’ comments that resonated most with the community, text analysis identified ten themes regarding the future of employee research. Five themes are highlighted and discussed: the evolution of the traditional employee survey, enhanced data and analytics, the proliferation of devices and digital technology, the increasing need for transparency and a focus on actionability.

Each of these themes is discussed in more detail to draw a picture of what the future is likely to hold for the field of employee research.
1. Why we conducted this study

The days of the traditional employee survey are numbered. Giving someone a questionnaire with 50 to 100 tick boxes (occasionally with a comment box) is not only tedious, it’s down right useless in identifying any sort of meaningful action in response. Organisations have become so obsessed with scores on employee surveys they have completely lost sight of what they surely set out to do: Listen to their people. Research techniques are advancing rapidly – the greatest difference is the shifting patterns of communication which is moving research away from giving employees a say behind closed doors to giving them a say in an open forum.

Social technologies are offering some truly pioneering ways of enhancing collaboration and generating feedback. This is exciting not only because it provides a more, dare I say it – engaging – experience for employees, but also because it creates broader opportunities for using their input. Capturing people’s interactions through social technology, and applying the latest text analytics, offers a new and rich source of insight.

The current state of the employee research industry is a joke. Employee surveys are a multi-billion dollar industry. Recent estimates suggest up to three-quarters of large companies conduct a ‘traditional’ employee survey every one or two years. What value is this adding? What incentive is there for the big research providers to push things forward when they are sitting pretty on such easy money – every year? It’s money for old rope.

I’d like to thank Milly Picton at Silverman Research, Prof. Ken Goldberg and Jay Patel at UC Berkeley, Reece Akhtar at UCL and Katie Jacobs at HR magazine. I’d also like to thank the 254 people who gave their time to participate in the research from August to October 2013.

Gathering opinion from employees on what they think about their organisation is, or at least should be, one of HR’s most critical roles. But with employees using innovative technologies in their personal lives, are the ways companies talk to their workforce really up to scratch?

At HR magazine, we work hard to be at the forefront of innovation in HR, which is why we chose to become involved with this research. From our conversations with HR professionals, we got the sense that there was some frustration with the current state of employee opinion gathering. Talk about the importance of employee voice is growing louder, and there’s a push from some quarters for a flattening of hierarchies and more transparency.

We spend a lot of our time hearing about how social technologies can help workplaces to become more collaborative, connecting people across an organisation to share and learn from each other. And yet many of the technologies companies are actually using don’t reflect the possibilities. For people who are involved with social networks like Facebook, Twitter or user-generated content websites like TripAdvisor, what they are given access to at work is often laughably behind the curve.

As this research reveals, many in the HR community feel employee surveys need to change. Social and mobile media could reinvent how HR gathers opinion, helping it to collate more useful and actionable analytics, and engaging more effectively with employees.

The employee survey needs to evolve in order to be relevant. I hope that this research provides some helpful insight into what employee research could look like in the future.
2. How it works

The study used a collaborative environment, called the Garden, which displays comments using data visualisation instead of a traditional list-based format. Conversations displayed in lists can quickly lead to information overload, so the Garden employs advanced statistics to produce an intuitive graphical map. In addition to allowing participants to navigate the discussion more easily, the visualisation also ensures that each participant has an equal chance of being heard. Participants’ ratings of each other’s comments are used to give prominence to the most insightful comments without the need for a moderator.

1. Participants use sliders to express their opinion on five ‘positioning’ statements about the future of employee research – this determines their position in the visualisation.

2. Participants are then prompted to respond to the discussion question: “How do you think employee research will change over the next 15 years?”

3. The Garden’s visualisation (see Understanding the Visualisation), allows participants to see where they stand relative to other participants. Participants can then read and rate the suggestions of others – this allows the best insights to be identified and the authentic voice of the community to be heard.

4. Participants can also get real-time feedback about how other people are rating their comment. These ratings are used to produce the leaderboard of top authors, which is posted at the end of the study.
3. Results

3.1 Positioning statements

Responses to the five positioning statements are shown in Chart 1. The data for these questions was collected using sliders (a visual analogue scale). Each bar shows a histogram of responses, so that both the spread of opinion can be easily seen as well as the mean and percentage agree/disagree.

Chart 1: Overall responses to positioning statements (n=254)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The traditional employee survey is dead</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The future of employee research is qualitative as opposed to quantitative</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My organisation uses social technology to gather feedback from employees</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile technology will become the most common way employees voice their opinion</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The biggest threat to advancing employee research is leaders’ fear of transparency</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just over half the participants (53%) agree that the traditional employee survey is dead. This is a damming finding, particularly for a population largely made up of HR and internal communications professionals – many of whom play an integral role within their organisation’s employee survey.

With regards to the balance of quantitative versus qualitative research in the future, two-thirds (69%) of participants agree that the future of employee research is more likely to be qualitative. These results demonstrate that a significant proportion believe that unstructured written data – rich in meaning and sentiment, is more useful than heavy quantitative data. In reality, it’s likely that hybrid approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative data, will become more prevalent. Either way, there is likely to be a major shift towards qualitative research.

Only a third of participants (33%) report that their organisations currently use social technologies to gather feedback from employees. The lack of organisational effort to fully utilise social technologies for employee research is particularly poor considering that many organisations have already implemented some form of internal social network (Yammer, Chatter, Jive etc). A resounding 82% agree that mobile technology will become the most common way in which employees voice their opinions. This reflects a widely held consensus that, in the future, mobile devices will be a vital tool by which employees will articulate their thoughts and opinions about their experiences at work.

The majority (71%) of participants agree that leaders’ fear of transparency is the most powerful factor in limiting advancements in employee research. Employee surveys are heavily controlled by management, they sign-off the questions and the output. Social technologies present a more threatening state of affairs to leaders: giving people a say in an open forum. For many, this level of transparency may be too much to handle as the perils of an open approach are often overestimated by leadership.
The difference will be amazing. Today, we create hypotheses and then go collect data. Tomorrow, we’ll be doing the inverse. The constant, steady state accumulation of data will enable us to look at the data before we form our questions. That means that we’ll be getting answers to questions we didn’t know to ask. We will be unthinking a whole bunch of things we assume to be facts.

As the demographic of our workforce changes, and access to social media increases employee research will move away from the traditional annual employee survey to more frequent and interactive research. As people become more confident in using social media their confidence will grow in being open and honest around the way they feedback and comment on their employer.

The biggest challenge is that leaders are not moving as quickly as employees and need to become more confident and engaged with the new medias and have the commitment to respond and act on employee comments. It will become more real time and challenge leaders to be more proactive and demonstrate the positive behaviours we are always promoting.

Employees’ behaviour will be increasingly traceable and measurable as more information about their activity is electronically captured. Organisations will be better at studying these patterns of behaviour - in the same way that consumer behaviour is studied - so rather than asking people questions which are subject to their mood and interpretation, organisations will be using objective metrics.

### 3.2 Top comments

Each participant receives an author score that reflects how other participants have evaluated their response to the discussion question. The score is based on four measures:

- the extent to which other participants agree with their comment
- the extent to which other participants think their comment is insightful
- a confidence score (the comment must have received enough ratings to be statistically reliable)
- a measure of the distance between the rater’s and author’s comments (we especially want to identify consensus comments – responses that are highly rated irrespective of difference in underlying opinions of author and rater).

The outcome is that it is possible to rank each author according to how much their comment has resonated with the community. The top three comments are shown below. Congratulations to John Sumser, who was the project’s top-rated author:

**John Sumser**
Editor
HRExaminer.com

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**Caroline MacDonald**
Internal Communications Lead
Hewlett Packard

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**Roland Burton**
Senior Communications Manager
Marks and Spencer

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The benefit of being able to identify the top authors (as rated by the community) is that the most important themes can be distinguished simply by reading their comments. This can be thought of as a form of ‘crowd-sourced text analysis’: instead of using text analysis software (as we do in the next stage of the analysis), the analysis itself is done by participants at source.

In reading through these comments, we can quickly identify what the community predicts to be important changes for the future of employee research: The use of analytics and data mining, a move to providing feedback through social technologies, more real-time feedback of information and an improved ability to capture more objective and passive metrics.

Without doing any analysis, we are able to get a good handle on the key topics that are being discussed within the community. The next stage delves deeper into participants’ comments by conducting a full text analysis.

### 3.3 Text Analysis

Text analysis is all about efficiently extracting meaning from large amounts of written data. The expansion of the text analytics industry is, in a large part, due to social media producing vast amounts of written data that organisations are eager to understand. The following analysis was conducted using Clarabridge’s text analysis software (www.clarabridge.com). Categorisation of comments was done using a combination of automated theme detection and manual word categorisation.

### 3.3.1 Overall Themes

Ten overall themes emerged from the text analysis. These are shown in Chart 2 (below) and described overleaf.

**Chart 2: Main themes – How will employee research change over the next 15 years?**
1. **Analytics:** A more strategic approach to data and analysis. Using a broader range of data sources (workforce metrics, opinion data, unstructured text, performance data, psychometrics, social networking/relational data, aggregation data) coupled with an increased capability to identify, segment, model and predict meaningful patterns within it.

2. **Surveys:** An evolution in the traditional survey methodology – from the typically long, generic, annual questionnaire to more frequent, focused, qualitative, real-time/interactive methods. More sensitive approaches that can capture both meaningful information and more subtle shifts in attitudes/sentiment. Allowing employees to conduct polls themselves and using various question aggregators (ie crowd-sourcing the right questions to ask in the first place).

3. **Social Media:** The widespread adoption of technologies that allow people to connect and interact will increasingly be used to collect and aggregate employee opinion. The increasing use of internal social networks will give rise to a proliferation of unstructured text data and associated text analysis.

4. **Collaboration:** The importance of promoting multi-directional communication and interaction (as opposed to traditional one-way and two-way communication) to establish a more collaborative approach to research that can tap into the collective intelligence of employees.

5. **Real-Time:** Conducting employee research in an ongoing and automated fashion in order to gain real-time/current insights as opposed to focusing on the comparison of single response points often a year or more apart.

6. **Devices:** An enhanced capability to use mobile technology for data collection/delivery and the increased prominence of devices such as wearable technology. This will open up feedback channels to non-office based employees that have often been limited in their ability to participate in research.

7. **Qualitative:** A shift in focus from quantitative data and analysis to hybrid approaches encompassing unstructured text data and advanced text analysis to extract themes, emotion and sentiment. Moving away from the idea that qualitative data is too unwieldy to analyse properly towards a view that the best way to capture feedback from employees is to ask them for a written or spoken response.

8. **Leadership:** Senior leaders lacking awareness about advances in collaborative research technologies and being fearful of the potential loss of control that comes with giving employees a say in an open forum. The importance of top-down led changes in research and management playing a crucial role in instigating and leading change.

9. **Transparency:** An emphasis on the importance of openness and honesty between leadership and employees in order to promote trust and collaboration. A move from giving employees a say behind closed doors to giving employees a say in an open forum.

10. **Action:** Conducting research that produces tangible solutions as opposed to just diagnosing general problems. Committing to a approach wherein employee responses lead to changes in the organisation rather than leaving the employees feeling that they are not being listened to. A move away from primitive engagement targets to targets based on subsequent action.

### 3.3.2 Combining text data with structured data

The advantage of using modern text analysis software is the ability to group participants based on the content of their written comments and then look at how those groups score on various quantitative measures. We can look at both how the community feels about these themes and the attitudes of the participants who talk about each theme. A visual representation of this is shown in Chart 3 and explained overleaf.
Chart 3: Prevalence of themes by community rating and beliefs about survey longevity

Each bubble represents one of the ten themes regarding how employee research will change in the future. The size of the bubble relates to the number of comments about that theme. The largest bubble (partly obscured) reflects comments about analytics. The vertical axis ‘Community Rating’ shows a measure of how much the community agrees with the comments that fall within each theme.

The horizontal axis displays the scores for the positioning statement ‘The traditional employee survey is dead’. The rationale for using this statement in the analysis is that we are able to see the difference in what themes are being mentioned by people who think the traditional employee survey is dead, compared to those who think it is not.

The reason it’s so important to look at text data alongside quantitative data is because it allows us to identify which of the ten themes should be explored in more detail. Inspecting the text data in isolation shows which themes are the most frequently mentioned, however, just because a lot of participants talk about a particular topic does not necessarily mean that it is the most important.

Looking at the bottom left of the chart, surveys are being discussed by a fairly large number of participants. What is important to note, however, is the position of the bubble within the chart: Participants that talk about surveys are more likely to disagree with the statement that the traditional employee survey is dead (on the horizontal axis). Further to this, the community rating provides a third dimension to the analysis. The low position of surveys on the vertical axis demonstrates that the community is least likely to agree with comments mentioning surveys.

The community is most likely to agree with comments about transparency and action respectively. This is important because although these themes are not the most frequently mentioned, there is widespread consensus about these comments.

Finally, people who think that the employee survey is dead are much more likely to talk about issues relating to devices and mobile technology.
4. What does the future hold for employee research?

Taking all the stages of the analysis together, the research has identified five key themes that will be explored further. These are: devices, action, transparency, surveys and analytics. This is facilitated by the fact that this research approach can distinguish the most agreeable and insightful comments within each theme.

4.1 Devices

Many of the comments within this theme refer to the huge technological advancements that will be seen in the workplace over the next 15 years. This is largely the proliferation of digital devices, such as smart phones, tablets, smart watches and other wearable technology which not only facilitate the collection of data, but also make it more readily and easily digestible.

![Without a doubt our traditional survey approach to measuring employee research will need to evolve, along with the environment in which we operate. We can’t expect that an age old approach will sustain the future, considering the advances we have already seen in the past 20 years in technology alone: The computer, laptop, tablet, mobile phone, PDA, android and apple products...](image)

Technology is clearly the key enabler for increased employee insight. Personalised development plans, delivered on mobile platforms by default, will expand to allow for real-time, qualitative employee feedback on company strategy, management competence or working environment.

It was frequently mentioned that mobile devices will be at the forefront of advancements in technology and will play an instrumental role in the future of employee research. The most obvious advantage is the potential to easily gather feedback from non-office based employees. Getting feedback from employees that have historically been ‘offline’ has been a particular sticking point for employee research. This issue has been partly addressed by using paper surveys, survey kiosks/computer rooms, providing tablets/PDAs or, occasionally, touch-tone telephony.

Over time, however, all employees (irrespective of location or role) will be much more connected to their organisations. This, in turn, will provide organisations with greater access to much more diverse virtual communities. As the price of mobile devices continue to fall, it will become increasingly common for organisations to provide all employees with mobile devices. Likewise, the growing prevalence of ‘bring your own device’ policies (permitting employees to use personally owned mobile devices at work to access privileged company information and applications), means that even the most hard to reach employees will be better connected.

![Virtual technologies and digital data will be a common place, sharing ideas virtually and reaching out to millions of people instantly will be part of our day to day lives.](image)

Advances in digital technologies also align closely with the theme of real-time information. Mobile devices afford increased real-time data capture. Moreover, they also provide a more rapid and engaging means of presenting data and insight.

![Instantaneous feedback using mobile devices will be the norm. Social interactions and decision making will move to virtual forums, away from formal boardrooms, and decision making (based on feeling/research) will decentralise and be decided by the virtual community - the virtual community will be vibrant, connected, transparent, assertive and personal.](image)
However, it is not only mobile devices that will be at the forefront of employee research, a number of other technological advancements will also play a role. For example, the imminent adoption of wearable devices (ie accessories and clothing incorporating computer and advanced electronic technologies), such as Samsung’s Galaxy Smart Watch or the much anticipated Google Glass.

*Bring in wearable tech and apps that encourage different sources and types of information with built in data visualisation to bring out the story and insight automatically.*

*Insight is not achieved through metrics. It comes from combing multiple sources of information across a variety of technologies.*

This has overlaps with the analytics theme in terms of the increasing sources of data that will be available. Comments regarding the influx of devices emphasise that it is not these technologies taken in isolation that will provide the real insight, but that using them together will provide a deeper level of understanding than current quantitative measures of opinion and behaviour alone.

Just imagine the volume and types of data that will be flowing from our devices in the future. How much text will there be to analyse when speech recognition becomes as good as human ability to analyse the spoken word? How long will it be before we can reliably and instantly translate text into any language? How will video analysis evolve with object detection and facial expression recognition? Will geolocation data have a role to play? And what about biosensor devices? Is there an external physical measure of employee engagement?

Technological boundaries are dwindling exponentially. In the future, billions upon billions of devices will be connected, talking and learning. This is referred to as the ‘Internet of things’ and it remains to be seen how this might impact our working lives, yet alone how feedback is provided.

### 4.2 Action

Many participants commented on the characteristic lack of action that typically accompanies traditional employee surveys. A clear prediction for the future of employee research is not only the improved identification of problem areas, but also a greater focus on the formulation of solutions and actions. The output of traditional employee surveys can often struggle in this area. It’s difficult to action plan off the back of largely numeric reports that contain useless conclusions. How are managers meant to action plan on such vague recommendations such as: ‘make people feel more valued,’ ‘increase trust in leadership’ or ‘enhance commitment to the organisational strategy’? In this way, the creation of tangible and actionable outcomes for all levels of the organisation was a recurring theme in this research: Employee research in the future will be more about curing problems than purely identifying symptoms. If your research is not producing actionable insights then why are you doing it?

*Employee 'research' of the future will be shaped by (i) mutual trust in the open dialogue between the organisation and it’s people, and (ii) demonstration of successful, tangible outcomes of the dialogue. Conclusions are reached much quicker through open dialogue, hence the research process will be much expedited. Let's hope 'research' of the future will be less about methodology and more about action and outcomes.*

*Insight into employee opinion will need to be gathered through this ecosystem, core trends shared across the business, and action to build upon opportunities or develop solutions to challenges devolved to employees through greater self-governance and ownership for organisational success, aligned to shared purpose.*
It was also suggested that action in response to employee research is both led, and conversely can be inhibited, by senior leaders. Many comments highlighted the importance of leadership support in seeking solutions through open dialogue, where organisations need to be seen to respond and act on feedback that is made in an open forum.

Managers’ behaviours will need to change and not fear what is said but to act on it. Listening groups will become more and more popular and encouraged for the non-manager team members.

Another important point is that traditional employee research metrics have often, too easily, lead to the establishment of primitive targets for various attitudinal measures (eg employee engagement). There are several problems with this: it turns employee research into a numbers game by focusing on the scores, it leads to procrastination – for example, about which people are included in which business unit and, worse still, it can produce various halo or horn effects (ie participants being dishonest in their responses). The focus of research in the future will be subsequent action and it is this action upon which leaders should be assessed.

Again, a theme that appears to run in parallel to action is the need for real-time information. Many participants suggested that it was not enough to simply respond and plan for future solutions, rather, that employee research will react to the here and now, taking action immediately and implementing solutions for present issues or problems.

Hopefully real-time analytics will be introduced not to just feed more data for the sake of it, but to produce real time action.

Employee Engagement research results need to be instant, real time to ensure that action is based on what is important NOW.

A final aspect to consider regarding actionability is that collecting employee feedback in an open, transparent and collaborative environment has enormous potential for participants to actually learn and share information during data collection. This can increase employee’s readiness for change in that they are more aware of the issues at hand and are more likely to feel that their voices have been heard. This is discussed further below.

4.3 Transparency

A common theme to emerge is the important role that transparency will play in the future of employee research. In the same way that machine technology forced the rise of mass production in the industrial revolution, social technology is driving us headlong into the age of mass collaboration and mass transparency. It is increasingly expected that information should be easily and quickly accessible to all. Indeed, this is happening whether organisations and leaders like it or not – information about their organisations is already available through various discussion forums and review sites.

Transparency is important for three reasons: firstly, in the pursuit of an authentic dialogue between employees and employers.

The role of engagement functions will be to facilitate conversations between employees at every level of the organisation, utilising an omni-channel approach that allows employees to connect with the organisation according to their personal preference. Transparency will be critical to building trust, and enabling well-informed, open and honest conversations to flourish.
Will shift away from annual/quarterly, quantitative data into continuous feedback where employees choose how/when they tell their employers what they think/how they feel about their leaders, work and workplace. This will be very individualistic and much more transparent (social networking will dominate?). Employers will have to counter-balance this by hosting group interactions, and initiating discussions with transparency as a requirement.

Companies better create the transparency within, if not employees will route their voice via other public channels (like glassdoor, linkedin and many more new apps).

Mobile technologies could help to capture and harness qualitative and quantitative feedback if used sensitively but relies on trust and honesty from both "sides".

Thirdly, transparency is also predicted as an important way to ask the right questions within employee research and formulate the most effective solutions.

Employees have the power to make and break organisations. More real-time metrics won’t advance this because it is fundamentally more about mining the data collected; asking the right questions that lead to the right actions, which lead to the business evolving. Trust and transparency will be critical to this.

Trust, authenticity and openness at all levels of the organisation will not only support developments in technology and research methods, but will also drive action and solutions.

4.4 Surveys

From the positioning statements, we know that just over half of respondents think it’s the end of the road for the traditional employee survey. This opens up a number of avenues to explore with regards to the evolution of surveys and what comes next. Many of the comments mentioned moving away from traditional employee survey methods to explore new approaches. There was a lot of talk about the demise of traditional surveys, the general opinion being that more fluid, authentic, real-time and conversational approaches, will replace them.

We will see an end to the monolithic annual all-staff survey and all its attendant baggage (anonymity, opacity, blame, bullying, response rates, witch-hunts, internal marketing, papering over the cracks, false promises, tell and sell instead of listen and learn). Just like annual performance reviews, they will be replaced with a more agile, real-time approach where feedback is a constant stream based on open dialogue and trust, through real-life and virtual relationships.

I believe [engagement research] it will still have an important component of perception about what the employee thinks, but that will move away from the annual big survey into social media and crowdsourcing approach to feedback.
We’re researching people, so let’s start using tools that are people-focused and can measure the social ‘noise’ that surveys and the status quo fail to do.

Employee research will start moving away from relying on surveys and will instead use the huge amounts of data generated from internal social media platforms in terms of both directed and volitional conversation.

Research will be enhanced by observing the collective voice of employees in how they really think and feel as demonstrated by their collective activity online as opposed to what they might state they think and feel such as when filling in a survey. This will reveal any conflicts between conscious and unconscious views and provide far richer insight, employees will be involved in decision making and action. Participation, transparency, collaboration, big data will all continue to be key themes.

I don’t think it’ll change overnight, but slowly new incremental developments where other technologies and functions are built into surveys, until the final product looks nothing like a survey. This is the function of most technological innovations (e.g. the mobile phone from the 90s is completely different in functionality compared to today’s mobile phones).

Another common subject was the frequency of surveys. Indeed, it has become increasingly common for organisations to conduct more frequent surveys (pulse surveys, temperature checks, dipsticks). These are typically shorter surveys, distributed to a rolling, representative sample. Intervals can range from six-monthly to quarterly, but some are going even further and implementing continuous polling in an attempt to get more ‘real-time’ information. Whilst conducting more frequent surveys does provide more frequent feedback – it is still a survey with all the associated drawbacks that they possess. In fact, some suggested that more frequent surveys can even be detrimental.

More frequent surveying doesn’t fix anything. Just making more data for more data’s sake.

Participants also spoke about increased integration between employee surveys with other methods and data streams (this is also discussed further in the next section).

The connection and linkage between hard (e.g. metric data expressed as ratios) and soft (e.g. survey data) data will focus not only on “what people are saying” but “what they are doing” - i.e. employees may say they are motivated and engaged but are they actually delivering impact.

Employee research will take a more integrated approach. Instead of relying on one or two sources that are often infrequent (e.g. annual surveys or “town halls”), research will incorporate social network “listening”, on-line community forums, external social “listening/monitoring”, frequent and short pulse surveys focused on key issues or near-term decision-making. By integrating these and leveraging predictive analytics, faster and deeper view of employee
4.5 Analytics

The most discussed theme within the research was the role of analytics. More specifically, an emphasis on the importance of collecting and managing a broader range of data. In addition, an increased capability to identify, model and predict meaningful patterns across ‘hard’ data (finance, operations, and organisational performance) and ‘soft’ data (employee opinion, psychometrics, and customer satisfaction).

Combining big data analytics across hard and soft data types will produce real insight. The way the data is collected needs to continue to use the current methods but also explore how wearable tech can change the game.

I can imagine Big Data and analytics will become more important, rather than the actual technology that collects it. The increased analytics will more reveal more insight and can be more cheaply introduced, if the right talent is hired or existing talent is further educated.

Further to this, attention was paid to the increasing sophistication of current metrics and analysis. Many participants advocate that by implementing a hybrid approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data, new levels of insight will be achievable.

Savvy employers will find a way of collecting and collating both quantitative and qualitative research on a near continuous basis and reporting on it in the boardroom in a way that makes sense along with the rest of the data reported on. That way this research will have true meaning in relation to how it affects the business financials and sustainability and we will see intelligently targeted responses to patterns emerging.

There will be more of a focus on integrated insight using both qualitative and quantitative sources to measure employee engagement and the drivers of engagement. We will never get away from HR measurement but I believe we will have more of a focus on HR analytics and the use of qualitative employee research will take some more time to embed in the business.

The trend of using ‘big data’ will link with employee perception data to provide more specific employee research. In the short term managers and leaders will tend to rely on this more and more instead of talking to their employees. In the longer term as employees get more comfortable expressing their views in a more social media context and ‘real time’ employee engagement data exists, managers will move back to talking directly to their teams to get their own employee research.

The ability to more effectively mine data is also predicted to have a big impact on employee research. Indeed, the top comment referred exactly to the potential of data mining to create hypotheses.

Instead of doing something to create data, we will look at the data we have in our systems already. It will also move beyond the current "average response" reporting and use more sophisticated analytic tools to find patterns, root causes, and be predictive at a very specific employee group, subset, and possibly individual level.
In addition, it is worth considering the new sources of data that have emerged in recent years. Social technologies provide a much more powerful means of obtaining ‘aggregation data’. Aggregation refers to the mechanisms that can transform individuals’ responses to collective decisions. In short, there can be two ways of aggregating information or knowledge. The most common way of reaching a collective decision is by aggregating all of the individual responses together (eg a survey provider creating an employee engagement score for the organisation based on individual survey responses).

However, advancements in technology have allowed new means of aggregation to emerge. For example, using social media, large groups of employees can read and rate each other’s responses to a particular question. From these ratings, it is possible to identify which comments (and which themes) resonate most with the community. As a result, the message provided to leadership is not shaped by an individual analyst or team of researchers, it is shaped authentically by employees themselves.

Aggregation is so important because social media can use various aggregators to help shape employee voice as well as represent it. It is only through these new technologies and algorithms that we are seeing, for the first time, genuine bottom-up and collective insight.

Although it was rarely mentioned by participants (probably due to lack of awareness), ‘network analysis’ is an important topic to cover in this report. It was in the 1930s that sociologists first started to draw diagrams (called sociograms) of nodes connected to each other by lines. Yet, it is only due to recent advances in data analysis capabilities and, of course, social media that network analysis is starting to capture the attention of the HR community.

The vast majority of data that HR captures is attribute data – these relate to the properties or characteristics of employees (eg attitudes, behaviours or their demographic characteristics). In contrast, relational data are the ties that connect employees to each other – they cannot be reduced to the properties of employees themselves. In its simplest form this can just be whether people know each other, but any type of relationship can be assessed depending on which questions are asked (eg. How much do you communicate with this person? How much influence does this person have? How often do you turn to this person for advice on important decisions?) The list is endless. In addition to visually inspecting the resulting sociograms, there are also various network statistics that can be calculated to provide insight into the various roles and groupings in a network.

5. Conclusion

The main message to emerge from the study is that the field of employee research is likely to advance exponentially in the coming years. The interaction between enhanced functional specialisms, increasing technological capability and changing societal norms is fuelling fresh approaches to generating insight.

The research identified ten themes relating to the future of employee research. Five of these were explored in more detail: the evolution of the traditional employee survey, enhanced data and analytics, the proliferation of devices and digital technologies, the increasing need for transparency and a focus on actionability. It is plain to see that there is interconnectivity between all of the themes identified – for example, the overlap between social media, collaboration and transparency. So, when considering what the future of employee research may look like, potential themes and developments should not be taken in isolation, rather, we can learn most by taking a rounded view of how employee research might evolve.

5.1 Stuck in the past

The materialisation of employee research as a discipline, of course, far predates the digital age. As a consequence, it would appear that organisations are stuck in pre-digital era thinking with regards to getting feedback from their people. The problem is that the field of employee research is wide, yet the vast majority of it is comprised of surveys.
Apart from transitioning to the Internet and some advances in analytical capabilities, the basic model of employee surveys has broadly stayed the same since its inception. Surveys can have various modifications and have seen limited developments in recent years. However, until surveys become more conversational with aggregation devolved to participants, until they are mixed with relational data – they are limited. This is the case no matter how frequently data is collected.

Although it was only mentioned by a handful of participants, the same can be said for the ability of research owners to adequately present and communicate insight and to evoke emotion in the recipients of research findings. This is an area of practice that will also change dramatically in the future. Bamboozling people with pages of bar charts and data tables is unlikely to drive results because numbers cannot lead to the emotional connection needed for people to take action. There has to be an emotional connection to the story contained within the data. This is data-driven storytelling: the ability to use data to tell stories.

5.2 System 1 and System 2 processing

The Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman has popularised the notion of two modes of thinking: System 1 and System 2. These two modes dominate the way we interact with the world and process information. The brain uses System 1 thinking to make fast and automatic decisions, and although this system is perfect in specific situations, its rapidness makes it prone to less than optimal decisions and cognitive biases (illogical judgements that the thinker is not consciously aware of). System 2, on the other hand, is slow and requires the thinker to give some mental effort to their thought processes. This makes System 2 thinking more resilient to cognitive biases and leads to an increase in insightful interpretations of a given situation.

The difficulty is that the nature of Likert scales and tick boxes encourage System 1 thinking. This rapid, yet erroneous, System 1 kicks in when the participant is presented with easy options that do not encourage critical or deliberative thinking. In the case of surveys, what could be easier than just mindlessly ticking a box? If organisations want to get their people to provide considered and insightful feedback, methods that encourage effortful and deliberative thought are needed – methods that allow for the personal insight that is achieved from qualitative approaches, while not losing the ability to collect metrics for statistical comparisons. This is the emergence of genuine ‘hybrid’ research approaches: where social and digital technologies, mechanisms for making collective decisions and advanced text analysis are making a huge difference.

It’s evident now that external social media networks influence how we form and voice our opinions. Social media activates System 2 thinking as it provides a platform for people to construct and voice an opinion that is significant to them. As the comments posted on social media networks are displayed in an open forum, people are more likely to use System 2 thinking because they know that their comments are going to be read and evaluated. This elicits a positive form of social pressure and interaction, which makes the experience not only more enjoyable but also increases repeat participation. Organisations don’t need to worry about losing quantitative data, as internal social media networks can be used to numerically reveal sentiment, the relationships people hold, and the personality traits and attitudes of their people.

5.3 Social technologies

The relentless advance of social and digital technologies means that the evolution of employee research is progressing rapidly. The greatest difference is the shifting patterns of communication that social technologies have caused – from one-way and two-way, to multi-directional communication. Consequently, this is moving employee research on from giving employees a say behind closed doors to giving them a say in an open forum. The implications of this for employee research are huge.

Within organisations, openness and transparency will be the vital business characteristics that will make all the difference in the coming years. However, for many leaders, this appears not to have sunk in yet. It seems that many leaders are yet to be convinced of the potential value that an authentic employee
voice, through social media, can deliver. This is because the perils associated with an open approach, and the benefits of more traditional closed systems, are often overestimated.

The use of internal social networks such as Yammer and Chatter has grown rapidly. This raises some important issues. In the future, organisations will increasingly be monitoring, analysing and extracting insight from employees’ conversations on internal social networks. However, whether employees will start to open up on internal social networks remains to be seen. Many platforms do not allow for anonymised comments and, as a result, this means that employees are unlikely to offer candid feedback. Indeed, one might argue that employees could be more likely to clam up in the knowledge that every word they type is being monitored. It is probable that an unwillingness for organisations to use social technologies that allow anonymised comments is another consequence of management trying to control communications channels.

5.4 HR is slow to respond

The positioning statements indicate a significant minority believes the traditional employee survey is far from dead. It would appear from the comments, however, that few think that the traditional employee survey will remain in its current state. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that it is not that these participants support traditional employee surveys, rather that these surveys are so deeply embedded in organisations that they will remain in their current state for some time to come.

This raises an important point with regards to the HR community, who are typically owners of employee research. Let us reflect on some of the highly rated comments from the research about the role of HR.

HR needs to be torn apart, remove all jargon and start a fresh. It’s no longer dynamic and slow to respond to any change or adopt innovation.

For engagement to be properly measured, we need technology that does not belong to HR.

I agree with much of the sentiment on using analytics, tech and moving away from surveys. I don’t think its leader’s fear of transparency that is the problem. I believe its HR inability to be progressive and quick to do anything. It’s a cultural disease that hopefully the incremental introduction of tech can remedy.

In the ideal world it will take HR no more than 15 more years to stop telling people what to do and how to do it and then doing it for them.

HR, and to some extent internal communications, own employee research within organisations. As such, it is their responsibility to keep up to date with advances within the field, to be brave enough to advocate new approaches. Most importantly, it is about people who deliver employee research within organisations being motivated to do things differently. It’s about putting the right people in charge of employee research in organisations. The field needs people who want to push things forward, not people who are there just to blindly deliver a survey and regurgitate employee engagement waffle from big survey providers.

The fact that employees are a captive audience for research (compared to customers or consumers) has undoubtedly caused the field of employee research to become lazy and fall behind the curve in attempts to generate feedback and make the research process engaging for participants. Arguably, the evolution of employee research is already happening in a minority of organisations, but the movement en masse away from traditional employee survey methods is, unfortunately, likely to take considerable time.
6. Understanding the Visualisation

1. Opinions on two statements can easily be plotted on a two-dimensional graph. Here, the more a person agrees with the first proposition, the further the point is to the right and the more a person agrees with the second proposition, the higher the point. Therefore, a user who rated two statements as illustrated by the sliders opposite would be plotted as shown.

2. Opinions on three statements can be plotted in a similar manner in three dimensions. Notice, however, that it’s difficult to interpret just how far away data points are from each other because the three-dimensional image is only shown in two dimensions. In other words, since you can’t walk around the illustration there is no depth perception.

3. Using statistics, multiple opinions can be projected onto two dimensions while maintaining distance relationship between the resulting points. It’s like shining a light onto a set of balls and observing their shadows. In the bad projection, from looking at the shadows, the blue ball looks closer to the green ball. Yet in reality, the green ball is closer to the red ball. In the good projection, however, the distance relationships are better preserved because the angle of the light was adjusted.

4. Similarly, the Garden’s algorithms use the information provided on the five positioning statements to find the best projection of data points in two dimensions. In this way, participants can interpret points near them as people who are similar to them and points that are far away as people who are different from them.
This report was written by Michael Silverman and Milly Picton at Silverman Research: an award-winning research company that specialises in applying social technologies and data visualisation to obtain the authentic voice of employees.

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