

Acting on evidence: some observations on the Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey, Sue Duncan digs a little deeper into the cross-Civil Service survey

The new civil service employee engagement survey presents a laudable attempt to harness the enthusiasm of staff to deliver positive outcomes, but will it deliver? This depends on how the results are taken forward. Without a serious attempt to understand what the results actually mean and to use them to identify positive action, there is a risk that opportunities to feed the results into meaningful reform will be missed.

Why survey staff?

'Employee engagement' was firmly established in the civil service lexicon with the publication of the MacLeod Review 'Engaging for success: enhancing performance through employee engagement' (BIS 2009); this report emphasised the importance of employers engaging with their staff and encouraged the civil service to act on this. In October of 2009, the civil service responded by launching an employee engagement survey. Badged as 'The People Survey' it aimed 'to reinforce the commitment of the Civil Service to realising the benefits of employee engagement'¹. It did not of course represent the first attempt by the civil service to survey its staff; for a number of years most departments have run their own surveys of staff and/or managers (see for example, DFID's 2007 Management Survey and CLG's 2008 survey of senior civil servants, 2007 staff survey and 2008 Pulse Survey).

What is different about The People Survey is that a tool for use across the civil service has been developed. This provides economies of scale, with estimated savings in administration costs of 35% (Civil Service website). More importantly, by the use of a single research instrument, providing core questions used across the departments and agencies, the aim is to enable cross departmental comparisons to be made and to allow benchmarking of levels of employee engagement across and within departments and agencies. It is also

¹ Unless otherwise stated, quotes are drawn from the Civil Service website www.civilservice.gov.uk

envisaged that the People Survey will 'target improvements to departmental performance' and 'provide a focus on what drives civil servants to achieve their full potential and empower leaders to deliver change accordingly'. These are ambitious and laudable aims, which present big challenges and the opportunity to make a real difference. If departments are to deliver on these aims, deeply rooted change will be needed.

Hailed by Mervyn Thomas, project sponsor, as 'the largest ever employee engagement survey', he makes the bold claim that 'By launching a survey on this scale, the Civil Service will not only improve the public services we deliver but also set a positive example to other employers' and '...give Civil Service managers an enhanced opportunity to fully understand the issues that are most important to all our staff...'. The enthusiasm for change is encouraging, but achievement of these ambitious claims depends in large part on what the civil service does with the results. The top line results were published in February 2010, with detailed results going to individual departments.

The Employee Engagement Index

The method involves using some of the survey questions to derive an 'Employee Engagement Index', based around three indicators of employee engagement, which draw on both employee engagement literature and on a pilot of the survey run in 11 departments in February 2009. The underpinning assumption is that engaged civil servants:

- speak positively of their organisation;
- are emotionally attached and committed to the organisation, and
- are motivated to do the best for the organisation.

Even before you consider the complexities of weaving this information into a meaningful index, these are challenging concepts to explore in a structured survey. The five questions used to generate data for the index are:

- 'I am proud when I tell others I am part of [the organisation]'
- 'I would recommend [the organisation] as a great place to work'
- 'I feel a strong personal attachment to [the organisation]'
- '[The organisation] inspires me to do the best in my job'
- '[The organisation] motivates me to help it achieve its objectives'

A conventional five point satisfaction scale was used in the survey, allowing responses to range from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. An index will be calculated for each business unit; scores can range from 0%, where everyone strongly disagrees with the five questions, to 100% where everyone strongly agrees.

The 'benchmark scores'² for the five indicator questions in the 2009 survey show the following levels of positive response:

- 'I am proud when I tell others I am part of [the organisation]'
- 'I would recommend [the organisation] as a great place to work'
- 'I feel a strong personal attachment to [the organisation]'
- '[The organisation] inspires me to do the best in my job'
- '[The organisation] motivates me to help it achieve its objectives'

² The benchmark is the median score for all 96 participating organisations.

The responses to the above questions and the derived 'civil service engagement index'³ score of 58% suggests there is considerable work to be done. Staff, however, were relatively pessimistic about whether action would actually be taken. Just 37% said they believed senior managers in their organisation would take action on the results from the survey and 45% said they believed that managers where they work would take action. Gus O'Donnell observed that, 'By establishing this survey, the Civil Service has shown that it is taking its responsibility to ensure staff are properly engaged very seriously.' The results in themselves are just a starting point; what happens next is crucial.

Drivers of Engagement

'Key Driver Analysis' is also being used; drivers were identified from the pilot survey and are:

- The work itself
- Learning and career development
- Inclusion and fair treatment
- Leadership and change management
- Clear objective and purpose
- Line manager effectiveness
- Recognition, review and feedback
- Teamwork
- Workload and resources
- Pay and benefits

The first four listed were identified in the pilot as the most important drivers of employee engagement. Each driver theme is derived from a combination of relevant

³ The Engagement Index is derived by giving a weighting to each response option, where 'strongly agree' equals 100%; 'agree' - 75%; 'neither agree/disagree' - 50%; 'disagree' - 25% and 'strongly disagree' - 0%

questions in the survey and scores will be calculated for each unit of 150 or more respondents. As with the Employee Engagement Index, the value of the Key Driver Analysis depends on the robustness of the questions in the survey; if carefully designed, they offer the prospect of enabling the generation of real insights. At the time of writing, no information on the outputs from the key driver analysis is publicly available.

The challenges of developing a robust measure

In surveys of this kind, the pilot stage plays a particularly important role; the scope for different interpretations of the questions is potentially great. A crucial issue when exploring the sort of complex areas covered in the survey is a real understanding of both how people interpret questions and what they mean by their answers. This is particularly important, given that there are so many levels of management within large organisations. For example, is the respondent who says that they are proud when they tell others they are part of CLG (or wherever), thinking about telling others in CLG, in the civil service or their friends? And are they talking about CLG as a whole or the smaller unit within CLG where they work? How do they answer if they have a generally jaundiced view of their department, but a very positive view of their particular unit? To some extent, these issues could be unravelled by the use of 'cognitive interviewing', where, at the pilot stage, a subgroup of respondents is asked to explain, in an unstructured interview, the thinking behind their responses.

In addition, surveys of this kind are always prone to the 'halo effect'. If a respondent has recently had a positive or negative experience at work, this can colour their view of the organisation as a whole, in the longer or shorter term. Attitude surveys of this kind are very sensitive to current events and there is a risk of identifying superficial, rather than deep seated attitudes. Related to this, attitudes are influenced by expectations; if you don't expect much, you may be satisfied by very little. There are obvious risks in basing action on superficial views and current political debate about the future of the civil service could have an important influence on staff attitudes.

It is acknowledged that the Employee Engagement model needs to be 'tested and verified' and, in a data collection exercise, which involves uncovering complex and probably multi-layered attitudes, it would be wise to review the survey instrument, as well as the model.

Problems, not solutions

So, many of these observations relate to the limitations of using quantitative survey techniques, where people give their immediate and sometimes ill-informed thoughts on complex topics. Having said this, it is understandable that the civil service has tried to obtain a quantified estimate of the state of employee engagement. The survey offers an opportunity to introduce well-informed transformational change, rather tweaking things at the margins. Much activity is underway to take the survey results forward, so one hopes the opportunity is not missed. Based on the pilot questionnaire and the information on the Civil Service website, it is not clear how departments will progress from a set of tables, an 'Employee Engagement Index' and Key Driver Analysis, to actionable results. Knowing most of your employees wouldn't recommend the organisation as a good place to work, tells you nothing about what is wrong. Conversely, knowing they would recommend it as a good place to work is not very helpful, unless you know why they think it is good. This is not an argument for abandoning the survey, but simply a caveat that the results need to be used with caution and that further exploration may be needed, in some areas, to uncover what lies behind expressed views. There is a risk that, in addressing one issue, you could actually negatively affect an area where scores are high. The devil is in the detail.

What next?

The core objectives of the People Survey are stated as:

- To improve the performance and well-being of civil servants;
- to improve their experience of work and
- to continuously improve the quality of Civil Service leadership.



Sir Gus O'Donnell, Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, has said that 'the People Survey will help provide a greater understanding of civil servants' experience of work, leading to improved public services'. He observes that 'Our Employee Engagement Programme enables us to do this by understanding and improving civil servants' experience of work, helping to ensure that they have access to the opportunities they need to achieve success in their roles....This, in turn supports our drive to deliver improved public services and better outcomes for citizens.' These are brave words embodying laudable sentiments. What is less clear is how the civil service plans to move from conducting a survey to improving public services and improving the lot of citizens. The Civil Service website gives little detail on what the Employee Engagement Programme actually consists of, beyond mentioning an eight person 'Employee Engagement Programme Team', charged with responsibility for implementation and delivery of the programme and for providing support to participating departments. The team consists of specialists in communications, employee engagement, procurement, finance, programme management and social research; eight people should be able to have some impact, but this will depend on what the team actually does and what it expects of departments. There is also an 'Employee Engagement Programme Board'⁴, led by Brian Etheridge in the Cabinet Office, though they will need some clout, to have influence. Departments will no doubt have received guidance from the Cabinet Office on what is expected of them and one can only hope that resources are available to move from survey results to action. If not, Sir Gus may be disappointed.

Unpicking complexity

More than 340,000 people across 96 departments, agencies and NDPBs, took part in the survey, which was a self-completion survey, either paper (25%) or IT based

⁴ Board members are Brian Etheridge, Cabinet Office (Chair & Senior Responsible Owner); Mervyn Thomas, Department for Transport (Programme Sponsor); Fiona Rogers, Central Office of Information; Katherine Courtney, Department for Work and Pensions; Patricia Greer, National School for Government and Peter Thomas, Ministry of Justice

in October and November 2009; though no direct information is available on response rates, it is stated that 'more than half a million were surveyed', giving an estimated response rate in the high 60s, which isn't bad. First results were made available to departments in February 2010. Much seems to be being pinned on the survey results, and the employee engagement index and key driver analysis, in particular. It is boldly asserted that the key driver 'analysis will provide a focus for action planning' and that 'analysis of the survey results will show how the different drivers relate to engagement levels. This, in turn helps show us where to focus our attention to improve engagement levels'. It all sounds deceptively simple and begs the question 'But how?' It also suggests a potential risk of being rather inward looking. Expressed attitudes will inevitably be influenced by cultural context, so if, as implied, the intention is to change the civil service culture, it may be valuable to look at employee engagement outside the civil service, as well as compare engagement levels within it.

What could and should departments be considering by way of follow on from the survey? The Civil Service website states that 'senior managers will ... use the results to focus resources and expertise where they are most needed, making frontline public services more efficient and effective'; this is a large leap from conducting a survey and implies a strong role for senior staff in leading and championing change. The challenge will be to develop a response which goes beyond more superficial transactional change – tweaking, modifying and making ad hoc improvements – and embraces more fundamental transformational change, which addresses deep rooted problems and finds enduring, coordinated solutions, which resonate with staff. In the current climate, when the civil service is experiencing considerable uncertainty, the temptation is to opt for the former, but this kind of quick fix is unlikely to bring the desired change and would present a missed opportunity to fully exploit a potentially powerful data source.

The logic of employee engagement means involving employees in solutions, as well as problem identification. Qualitative techniques, such as focus groups and depth interviews are a well-established way of getting below the often stark responses that



quantitative research can produce, especially when attitudinal issues are being explored. Top line numbers are a start, but deep understanding is crucial and a quantitative survey is limited in the insights it can offer on attitudinal issues. Qualitative research can assist in explaining what drives expressed attitudes; the drivers are the key to actionable change. Similarly, staff consultations, which draw on the techniques of qualitative research, can both help staff to feel involved and committed to action, and provide workable solutions. This follow-on activity needs to both unpick problems and identify and build on what is good. Identifying and promoting examples of good practice in the organisation is likely to be more powerful than focussing on poor practice and addressing problems head-on. The next stages will be crucial to the successful deployment of the results of the People Survey.

The challenge is large, but so are the potential benefits. The most effective responses will be both evidence-based and inclusive; they will go beyond superficial change and they will be supported by strong and committed leaders. At a time of considerable uncertainty and change, it will be interesting to see what the civil service can deliver.

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