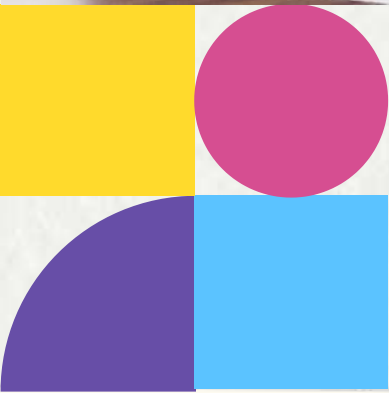


HOW TO EMPOWER YOUR VOICE OF EMPLOYEE



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acting on the survey results is
essential.

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WHAT DEFINES THE VOICE OF EMPLOYEES (VOE)?

Many companies perceive initiatives around the Voice of Employees (VoE) as a Human Resources (HR) imperative. However, VoE is a strategic asset that enables all leaders to improve the business process by creating an inclusive and safe working environment that aims to bring out the best in its employees.

So, what defines VoE? It is when employees know that their opinions, complaints, and recommendations about their experience and satisfaction with the company are heard, and their management is supportive and acts on the collected information.



IMPORTANCE OF THE VOE

A large utility company experienced a fire that resulted in loss of life, other assets and even heavy fines. It was found that some employees had already expressed their concerns through emails about the poor maintenance of pipelines and equipment. Although they have repeatedly requested the management to allocate a budget for repairs, no actions were taken until the occurrence of the tragedy. In this organisation, the VoE was not heard or at least not acted upon.

On the other end, let's look at Hilton, which has been ranked number one on the *Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For* continuously for the past six years. Hilton understands that its employees are the main driving factors behind customer satisfaction, as employee interaction helps set the tone of customer experience. Therefore, Hilton actively listens to its employees to better understand employees' current and future needs, and immediately responds to the highlighted challenges in its Global Team Member Survey (GTMS), from frontline employees to corporates.

Hilton's survey consists of four critical areas: engagement, trust, leader effectiveness and the "Thrive Index", which focuses on employee well-being. Instead of annual surveys, Hilton adopted pulse surveys as it allows them to address the issues their employees encountered at work immediately. This perhaps explains the success of running GTMS with a 92% completion rate with more than 150,000 participants.

While VoE helps companies identify employee needs, companies need to take immediate action on the highlighted challenges. This can include the challenges they encounter at work, the support they need from the team, learning and development opportunities, mentoring, and coaching. At the same time, VoE allows companies to better understand the challenges employees may be experiencing that the leaders might not be aware of.

For example, Ben (not his real name) is an educator from a well-known Singaporean enrichment centre. Ben and his colleagues have been receiving abusive messages from their boss late at night and during holidays. If they go against their manager, they will be regarded as disrespectful. They are also threatened with dismissal from the company with legal consequences. Therefore, nobody dared to challenge their boss but went along with all requests. Without a VoE in place, HR might not be aware of such situations, which will eventually worsen, and turn into low productivity, high turnover and toxic company culture.

Therefore, companies should continuously encourage their employees to express themselves as it can help positively impact business results while improving employee satisfaction and engagement.



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HOW TO PUT A VOE PROGRAM INTO PLACE

Below are the steps on how companies can introduce the VoE programs effectively:

STEP 1:

CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE OF TRUST AND INCLUSIVITY

“My manager expects us to act like owners, but he is reluctant even to provide keys to us who arrive early before other office staff,” said a plant employee. Sounds familiar? If the manager couldn’t even grant access to the plant worker by providing the key to enter and exit the building, how were they supposed to feel a sense of ownership?

The above example illustrates a possible lack of trust toward employees. Without creating a culture of trust and transparency, employees might be reserved about providing their honest input or share their challenges with their workplace leaders. Mutual trust is key to getting truthful and honest sharing of VoE.

The manager may be genuinely concerned about safety at the workplace, or the manager may have had previous unpleasant experiences, leading to the decision of not providing keys to early-comers. This fear and lack of trust might affect the relationship with their team. To help create that culture of trust, the manager must find compromises or communicate openly. Once mutual understanding is achieved, trust is restored.

“Who would trust in the survey’s confidentiality?” said a *Forbes* columnist to a reader whose company was conducting an annual employee engagement survey. While we spend most of our time at the workplace, **less than 50%** of lower-ranked employees, such as non-executive and non-managerial, trust the companies they work for. This was found in a study by the World Economic Forum. Stephen M. R. Covey, a bestselling American author, believes that trust between managers and employees determines the company’s overall performance and revenue. In other words, **confidence** builds the foundation of employee-manager relationships.

Thus, companies must create an **environment** where employees feel safe with honest opinions without fear of repercussions. On the other hand, managers can **proactively reach out** to their subordinates for suggestions rather than waiting for them to knock on their doors. You might be surprised at how much employees are willing to share once trust is established.

Step 2: Collect VoE Data

There are multiple avenues through which companies can listen to their employees, including 360-degree feedback, employee engagement surveys, one-to-one meetings with employees, suggestion boxes, and allowing employees to participate in certain high-level meetings.

When designing the questions, companies must ensure that appropriate topics are chosen, and that the questions are constructed to enable deeper conversations. The responses should provide insights that translate to actions which directly address the current situation or processes in place. Below is a list of suggestions collected from Gartner on what we believe could help to build trust in VoE:

1. The company has the employees' best interest at heart upon making decisions.
2. The adequacy of communication between management and employees.
3. An appropriate amount of information is shared upon making decisions at work.
4. Reaching out to the right people when unexpected situations occur.
5. A good grasp of the company's information structures and processes.



Source: *Dilbert.com*

Ideally, companies must aim to create a culture of trust and transparency to build better relationships with their employees. However, it is ironic that the HR department carries out anonymous surveys of their employees. If a company has to get their employees' honest feedback through anonymous feedback, it shows a low level of trust towards the management and a lack of freedom of speech in the workplace. However, this is understandable, as the focus should be on the truth, and giving employees psychological safety is essential to ensure that this is the case.

Source	Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
Full Anonymity	Company does not know who the respondent is	Elicits more truthful response	Inappropriate comments might be expressed due to lack of accountability
Validated Anonymity	Third-party validates respondents are who they claim to be	Ensures target population is correct	Inappropriate comments might be expressed due to lack of accountability
Confidential	Company knows who respondent is, but does not reveal the identity	Protects respondents from retaliation	Employees may not trust that responses will remain confidentiality
Identified	Respondent known publicly	Elicits more careful responses from employees, often leading to actionable feedback	May limit participation and candour

Source: IBM Institute for Business Value and IBM Smarter Workforce Institute analysis.

From the above table, you will notice that there is a possibility that the HR department will receive inappropriate comments due to a lack of accountability. It is similar to netizens who abuse their internet freedom by not being accountable for what they say online. On the contrary, the identified survey respondents might be more cautious in providing their input, which often leads to **actionable feedback**. Shouldn't this be the ultimate goal of having VoE in the first place?



STEP 3:

ANALYSE VOE DATA

Sentiment analysis or opinion mining is a machine learning tool that helps companies uncover their employees' emotional states through analysing communications, whether speech or text. The algorithm will process the data, read the qualitative feedback, and categorise them into various rating buckets with different tags. Each bucket will be automatically interpreted as overall positive, neutral or negative.

This can be done by relying on machine learning techniques to learn from the data and auto-classify. Another method uses a rule-based algorithm that looks for specific keywords or phrases to classify the response. The third approach is a hybrid one, which merges automatic and rule-based processes.

Overall, sentiment analysis brings significant benefits to the companies, including:

- **Quantity:** Ability to categorise significant amounts of unstructured data effectively.
- **Timeliness:** Real-time analysis to enable companies to identify situations that urgently need to resolve.
- **Objectivity:** With a centralised sentiment analysis system, companies can apply an agreed set of requirements across data without being influenced by personal experience and beliefs.





STEP 4: ACT ON YOUR RESULTS

You might be wondering how often companies should conduct employee engagement surveys as you feel that people might be tired of surveys. However, Didier Elzinga, the CEO of Culture Amp, believes that people are not exhausted from completing surveys but from the lack of action after completing the study. Therefore, instead of worrying about survey frequency, companies should focus on creating **feedback loops** in which action should be taken, and results should be communicated to employees.

During the pandemic, a large tech company conducted an employee survey to determine their employees' productivity when working from home (WFH). After they took half a year to do the A/B testing and analysed a tremendous amount of data, it was concluded that there is no visible difference between working remotely and WFH. Despite the amount of time and effort spent on this, the senior management still preferred to see their employees working at the office. If we, as a company, are going to collect VoE data, we must be prepared to take action on it as well. Else you will undermine the activity again in the future.

Take Network Rail, for example, which has been conducting their employee engagement survey called "Your Voice" since 2013. Fifty percent of the employees participated in the survey, and 37% believe that actions will be taken into consideration to address the highlighted problems. The company wants its employees to believe that they actively listen and are willing to make an effort on the issues they highlighted in the survey. In fact, they even ran a campaign called "You Said. We Did".

Additionally, Network Rail adopted emotional intelligence and 360-degree feedback to help increase self-awareness. While the company encourages their employees to be innovative and collaborative in tackling future challenges, they provide coaching support and run a business simulation that allows the participants to role-play difficult situations within a safe environment. The company believes that it must train its employees to look at the bigger picture to deliver change. As a result, 80% of employees strongly believe they have improved their ability to manage performance, communication skills, self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Also, learning has become easier to put into practice. On the other hand, employees find that their leaders' impact on others has become more positive.

HOW MANAGERS CAN ACT ON THE SURVEY RESULTS

So, what have you learnt from Network Rail's case? Feedback alone is not enough; **acting on the survey results** is essential. An employee engagement survey serves as a company's guide on where to focus, while the survey results act as a communication channel and a result tracking tool. Therefore, leaders should set aside time to **communicate the survey results** with their employees. While **discussing with employees**, it is essential to note whether the results align with the company's expectations. From here, identify your team's strengths and untapped potential.

Below are tips on how managers can act on survey results:

1. Discuss the results with your team.
2. Narrow down to a few critical focus areas where you can make meaningful changes.
3. Brainstorm ideas with your team for actions.
4. Set clear next steps and assign ownership.
5. Measure the effectiveness of the actions.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Employees are a vital asset for companies as they determine business success. Therefore, it is crucial for leaders to actively listen to VoE, as it helps to build a trusting relationship with your employees. Make sure their voices are heard through multiple channels and that it translates into actions.

When employees realise that the senior management is supportive, they become more engaged at work, leading to increased productivity and innovation in addressing customer challenges. Overall, improved employee satisfaction positively impacts employee retention and employer branding.

Therefore, you should continuously seek better ways to improve your employee experience and engage the right tools such as Budaya to help your company do the heavy lifting.



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