

# Getting Them Out and Getting Them Back

*Here are some guidelines for getting your employee questionnaires to a random, representative group of workers—and 10 tips for getting employees to complete and return them.*

You've decided to use a questionnaire to complement your interview and focus-group training needs assessments. You carefully construct the questionnaire, involve everyone you can think of in the development phase, pilot test it, revise it, and send it out to your specified target group.

But you don't get back as many as you would have liked; you're not even sure that they are representative of the organization. You hope that your interviews and focus groups will do a more complete job of delineating training needs.

Sound familiar?

Not all attempts to administer and collect paper-and-pencil information have to follow that pattern. By using some important guidelines, you can dramatically improve the quantity and quality of information gathered by surveys, questionnaires, and other paper-and-pencil assessments.

Several major issues can make or break the relevance of information gathered through questionnaires. If your questionnaires don't go to a representative sample of your target audience, or if the sample that receives them won't complete them, then most of your important development and design effort has been wasted. Three questions are key:

- How can you ensure a representative sample when administering organizational questionnaires?
- How can you determine what sample size is appropriate for your data-gathering procedure?
- How can you increase compliance to complete and return questionnaires?

## Random and representative

Once you have developed your questionnaire, you must define your target audience. That often involves an agonizing—and sometimes mysterious—process. The first critical decision is whether to send the survey to everyone in the target audience or to a representative sample.

In survey research, a general rule is "the more data, the merrier." Each time you administer a questionnaire to an employee group, you create a "soft" intervention. It may be worthwhile to include all employees in your target audience; that sends the message that everyone's feedback is important and will be considered in organizational change efforts.

*Nowack is with Organizational Performance Dimensions, 20950-38 Oxnard Street, Woodland Hills, CA 91367.*

If it is not feasible or necessary to administer the questionnaire to all employees of your target audience, consider using a sample. A representative sample of a target audience allows you to generalize the results effectively to apply to the entire target audience. Sampling procedures can be more economical in terms of time and expense for such items as data analysis, keypunching, and postage.

In making the decision to use a sample rather than the entire target audience, remember two important concepts—it must be random and it must be representative.

A random sample means that everyone in the target audience has an equal opportunity to be selected to complete your organizational questionnaire. If the employees you use are not randomly selected from the target audience, the sample you select can strongly influence your results. That could make it hard to accurately generalize your questionnaire findings to apply to the entire organization.

Let's look at an example with a training needs-analysis questionnaire

ployee in the three divisions had an equal chance of being selected. The well-meaning attempt to select 50 employees initially because you knew they would comply was not an example of random selection. In fact, those employees may be different because they know you. Their particular training needs may or may not be useful to generalize to the rest of the employees in all three divisions. You thought that using the phone book would be a clever way to determine who should be included in the administration of the questionnaire, but it didn't work out that way.

Because the sample was not truly representative of the type and number of employees in each of the three divisions, the results of the survey were discounted.

### How many is enough?

If it is not necessary to send a questionnaire to everyone in the target population, how many should you send out? What is the minimum number of respondents needed for you to be confident that the sample size will

reflect the sentiments of the entire target population?

The minimum number depends on several statistical factors:

- the expected response rate of the questionnaire (a 50 percent response rate is generally considered good);
- the precision of the population estimate (for example, within plus or minus 5 percent);
- the confidence level (for example, a 95 percent confidence level means that 95 out of 100 times a sample will provide the desired precision level).

You can calculate the minimum sample required using this formula: Minimum sample size = (population size) × (.96) / (.0025(population size) + .96).

For example, to make valid inferences from a population of 700 supervisors and managers, you would need to have at least 248 questionnaires returned to have a 95 percent confidence level that the results were within plus or minus .05 accuracy for the entire target population. The equation you would use to calculate that minimum sample size would be  $(700)(.96) / (.0025(700) + .96) = 248$ . If

**If it is not necessary to send a questionnaire to everyone in the target population, how many should you send out?**

involving a company with three large divisions of 500 employees each. You decide that it is not feasible to send out 1,500 questionnaires, so you will sample from the three divisions.

First, you hand-pick 50 employees whom you know personally, because you know you can count on them to complete the questionnaire. Next, you go to your organizational phone book and take the first 100 names. You send out 150 questionnaires and are happy to receive 100 back.

You quickly analyze the data and brief the division managers on your findings. But one of the division managers refuses to accept the results, because less than 10 percent of the sample from her division was included in the findings. She disregards all of your questionnaire findings and interpretations.

The problem is that not every em-

### An Example

You have a target population of 1,500 that you want to sample for a training needs assessment study. The population is made up of the following:

- 10 percent supervisors and managers;
- 25 percent administrative and clerical staff;
- 25 percent professional staff;
- 30 percent technical personnel;
- 10 percent manufacturing and production workers.

1. How many questionnaires will you need to send out in order to meet the minimum sample size required to make reliable inferences about the questionnaire data, assuming a 50 percent return rate?

2. How many questionnaires will you need to send out to receive a representative sample of professional staff? Of supervisors and managers?

### Answers

1. Use the formula to find that the minimum sample size needed is 306 for a population of 1,500. Assuming a 50 percent response

rate, you would need to send out at least 612 questionnaires.

2. To make sure that the sample was representative of the target audience, you would need to distribute about 153 questionnaires to the professional staff (.25 X 612) and about 61 to supervisors and managers (.10 X 612). Again, assume that the response rate is 50 percent and the sample is randomly selected.

The example shows how to get a sample that is representative of the job classifications of the target population. You should try to ensure a representative sample with all demographic variables of interest to the project (such as job level, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, division, and product line). Of course, that assumes that you have thought about how you might want to analyze your questionnaire—before you distribute it. Remember, poor representation of your target audience will diminish the usefulness and acceptance of questionnaire findings.

## Ten Ways To Increase Response Rates

The following 10 techniques may help to increase the compliance and response rates for questionnaires you use in your organization.

**1.** Make sure that participation is voluntary and either anonymous or confidential. Employees who feel coerced into participating may comply, but may provide incomplete or biased answers.

Determine whether you need to identify employees (for example, you may require a post-intervention follow-up using a questionnaire). If so, inform employees of the rationale for identifying them and of what you will do to make sure that their identities are protected. If employees believe that their identities will be revealed (or that their results will be posted in the bathrooms or elevators), they may think twice about returning the questionnaire.

**2.** Provide a complete cover letter addressed personally to each employee. The cover letter should be signed by the highest-level executive you can find, and should include the following:

- purpose of the questionnaire;
- whether it is anonymous or confidential;
- how the survey will be used;
- how and to whom respondents should return the questionnaires;
- when respondents should return the questionnaires.

**3.** Make it easy for employees to return the questionnaires. Provide a postage-paid envelope (external mail) or pre-addressed mailer (company internal mail) to help employees.

**4.** Make the questionnaire look professional. With today's technology, including desktop publishing with laser printers and typeset-quality fonts, there is simply no excuse for producing a questionnaire whose appearance could minimize employee participation. You can greatly increase employee compliance by spending a few more dollars to have a graphic artist or desktop-publishing specialist help with the layout, graphic design, typesetting, and reproduction.

Remember, each questionnaire leaves an impression on the employee who receives it. As in all organizational interventions, you want to create a professional, positive, and competent image with your internal customers.

**5.** In general, as the length of any questionnaire increases, its reliability increases and the compliance rate decreases. That rule creates a challenge in questionnaire design and administration within organizations. Make sure that your questionnaire is long enough to be reliable (or to have internal consistency or integrity) but not so long that it discourages employees from completing it.

The "compliance/reliability" issue is often resolved by clarifying exactly what you wish to measure, eliminating redundancy, and using brevity as an absolute editor. Compliance can be increased with a longer questionnaire by ensuring that it is professional looking, with a pleasing graphic layout that is easy to read.

**6.** Include a separate demography graphics page with the questionnaire. It can come either at the beginning of the questionnaire or at the end; there is no agreement on which placement has a better effect on compliance. Limit the demographics to variables that you feel are relevant to the project and that you will analyze statistically. Remember, the more demographics you ask, the easier it is to identify individual employees. As demographic variables increase, the compliance rate will tend to decrease slightly.

Controversial or potentially upsetting questions (such as those on substance abuse or discrimination complaints) should be placed toward the end of the questionnaire. Research has shown that compliance on controversial questions increases when they are placed in the middle or at the end of the questionnaire or survey.

**7.** Alert managers and employees ahead of time that a questionnaire is being developed and will be sent out. Make special presentations to managers alerting

them to the purpose of the questionnaire. Use organizational communication channels such as company newsletters or announcements to describe the importance of the questionnaire and the anticipated use of the results—before it is mailed out.

Encourage supervisors and managers to make announcements encouraging employees to fill out questionnaires and to return completed ones during staff and team meetings.

**8.** Provide incentives to reinforce employee compliance. Employees can be motivated to comply when some form of incentive is tied to the return of the questionnaire. Your organization may not be able to raffle off a new car, but it can provide some inexpensive incentives that most employees will value. Some examples might include discount movie tickets, books, training programs, meals in the executive dining room, preferred parking spaces for a period of time, discounts in the company store, and organizational paraphernalia such as coffee mugs, briefcases, and pen sets.

Such incentives can be used even when the questionnaires are completely anonymous. Randomly assigned "double raffle tickets" with numbers can be attached to each questionnaire sent to an employee. Employees are instructed to keep one of the tickets and leave the other attached to the questionnaire when it is returned. One or more of the tickets is selected from the pool of returned questionnaires, and the winners can claim their prizes.

They may sound "too cute" for your organizational culture, but such incentives can dramatically increase employee participation. Remember, without an adequate response rate from your employees, you may not be able to make valid inferences about the questionnaire results.

**9.** To increase the response rate, follow up with employees after the questionnaire has been distributed. If the questionnaire is not anonymous, follow-up phone calls are effective for increas-

ing compliance. When anonymity is preferred, follow up through a memo encouraging cooperation in completing the questionnaire. Postcard size reminders and the use of organizational communications, such as a company newsletter, can also be used to encourage employees to return the questionnaires by the target date.

For a large organizational questionnaire, it may be valuable to conduct an evaluation of those who did not comply (assuming that the individuals can be identified). Such a study may provide important information about the organization's current climate, as well as delineating employees' reasons for not providing feedback.

For example, one study revealed that employees thought that the organizational questionnaire was too long, that questions were too personal, and that respondents could be easily identified despite assurances of confidentiality.

**10.** Provide employees with feedback about the questionnaire results. This is one of the most powerful ways to ensure participation in a survey. Employees are curious; they want to know the major questionnaire findings and, more important, what is going to be done about their concerns and recommendations.

Organizations that break the "feedback rule" will pay later—the next time they ask employees to share their observations, attitudes, and feelings by using any data-collection method. Employees who do not feel as if their opinions are heard and valued will simply stop providing them.

Feedback can occur in a variety of forms and can even be targeted to special audiences. Management and employee briefings, although time consuming, can be useful. They provide an opportunity to share questionnaire results and to discuss possible organization interventions. Written reports, executive summaries, and newsletter articles are also useful feedback tools to consider after your questionnaire has been analyzed.

you anticipated a 50 percent return rate, you would need to distribute about 500 questionnaires in order to secure the minimum sample size required.

The accompanying figure summarizes the minimum sample sizes required for different size target populations, calculated from the formula. The minimum sample sizes given in the figure will provide a 95 percent confidence level that the sample is within plus or minus 5 percent of the actual population estimate. If your return rate is at least 50 percent, you can feel confident that your sample is providing you with information that is truly reflective of the target population.

Now that you have a statistical method for determining the minimum sample size required from your target population, you need to know how to guarantee that the sample is truly

representative of the population. That will assist you in "selling" both the analysis and the interpretation of the information gathered. It may also help you to get managers to accept organization interventions and training programs that may be recommended as a result of the questionnaire findings.

The box (on page 83) gives an example of a target population to sample, and some questions and answers for making the sample representative of the employee groups and large enough to be reliable.

### Getting employees to comply

Now that you have figured out how many questionnaires you have to get back to make worthwhile inferences about the target audience, go ahead and distribute them to a random, representative sample. Then, hope that employees will comply and return them to you. Low response rates raise important concerns.

For example, if significantly fewer than 50 percent of people in your sample return the questionnaires, the attitudes of the respondents may be very different from those of the non-respondents. Making inferences about employee attitudes based on the information gathered may not be in the best interests of the organization. When response rates are low, interpret questionnaire results with caution; respondents may not be accurate barometers of the target audience.

### Worth the effort

It is not enough to design effective questionnaires, surveys, and other paper-and-pencil tools to assess employee attitudes, observations, and opinions. The sampling procedure must be random, representative, and large enough to make valid inferences about the organizational population.

Getting employees motivated to respond to your survey will ensure that all the hard work that went into questionnaire design, pilot testing, revision, and administration is well worth the effort. With the techniques outlined above, you are well on your way to successfully getting out your employee questionnaires—and, more important, getting them back.

#### Minimum sample sizes

Table for determining the minimum sample size required to generalize results to apply to an entire population. Level of confidence is 95 percent that the sample proportion will be within plus or minus .05 of the population proportion. Sample size refers to questionnaires returned, not those sent out. Assuming a 50 percent return rate, send out at least twice the minimum sample size.

Population Size	Sample Size
10	10
50	44
100	80
200	132
300	169
400	196
500	217
600	234
700	248
800	260
900	269
1,000	278
2,000	322
3,000	341
4,000	351
5,000	357
6,000	361
7,000	364
8,000	367
9,000	368
10,000	370
20,000	377
30,000	379
40,000	380
50,000	381
100,000	384