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Revisiting the Great Survey Debate: Aren't We Past That Yet?

ALLAN H. CHURCH AND CHRISTOPHER T. ROTOLO
PepsiCo, Inc.

Employee surveys are one of the most important tools that industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists, human resource professionals, and organization development (OD) practitioners have for communicating, measuring, and driving change efforts in organizational settings. As many practitioners have noted (e.g., Burke, Coruzzi, & Church, 1996; Church & Waclawski, 2001; Falletta & Combs, 2002; Kraut, 2006) surveys have taken on a decidedly more strategic and long-term emphasis. This trend has considerable implications for how surveys are designed and administered in organizational settings going forward, including the role of what Saari and Scherbaum (2011) term ''identified'' (or what we would label as confidential) survey approaches versus those that are strictly anonymous in nature. In short, Saari and Scherbaum appear to be raising, or perhaps more appropriately from our perspective revisiting, the age-old debate among survey practitioners regarding whether (and when) confidential or anonymous surveys are (or should be) the preferred method for collecting employee responses.

The purpose of this commentary is to provide a counter point of view and recommendation to that of Saari and Scherbaum's regarding the use of identified surveys in organizational settings, that is, that the preferred method of surveying should be identified or confidential, not anonymous in nature. Our comments fall into two distinct categories: (a) those relating to the practice of conducting identified (or confidential) versus truly anonymous employee surveys and (b) those regarding the management of expectations on the part of both the respondents and those championing (or subsidizing the cost of) employee survey efforts. Each of these is described in more detail below.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Allan H. Church.
E-mail: allan.church@pepsico.com
Address: PepsiCo, Inc., 700 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, NY 10577

Transparency of Purpose and Data

Although we agree with Saari and Scherbaum on several of their points (e.g., ensuring clarity of purpose and use of the data to employees and clearly communicating the type of data being collected), we disagree with their recommendation that unless absolutely necessary (i.e., for longitudinal linkage research aimed specifically at the individual level of analysis), practitioners should not use identified surveys as their administration method of choice. The authors appropriately cite the issues of trust, data misuse, response behavior, and retaliation as potential negative outcomes associated with widespread use of identified or confidential surveys.

Although we respect their position and agree that these are indeed issues of which the practitioner must be cognizant, from our perspective, we would argue that using identified surveys whenever possible is the preferable method of administration (of

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course with an important caveat, i.e., with appropriate data security measures in place and where it makes sense; e.g., not in low trust cultural environments). If executed correctly (or by using external vendors such as Saari & Scherbaum mention), identified or confidential surveys offer a host of benefits that far exceed any potential negative consequences. There are several reasons for this.

First, because detailed demographic information can be obtained from linked sources, the identified survey has the potential to offer a significantly shortened survey questionnaire and therefore a reduced response burden. As survey length has been shown to impact item completion and response rates in organizational settings (e.g., Church, 2001) and response rates are used as a critical barometer for the validity of the survey effort itself (e.g., Church & Waclawski, 2001; Kraut, 1996), this outcome alone is arguably worth the effort to code respondents in an identifiable manner.

Second, the use of an identified survey yields significantly greater confidence in the results that are reported back to end users or clients in the organization because that demographic information is more precise. We have seen anonymous survey applications, for example, where employees selected the wrong demographic function or geographic location when responding, thereby rending the credibility of the results in question at the action planning level. When an engagement survey summary for the legal function is delivered to the general council and the report shows responses from 48 lawyers yet there are only 21 in the company, this effectively renders the results useless and casts a negative light on the entire process overall.

The third benefit of using identified surveys as the preferred method of administration concerns the simple truth that practitioners do not always know (nor can they anticipate) what research or business relationships will be questioned in the future. Whether due to questions from a senior leader, the development of a new business strategy, or a change in emphasis on HR metrics and analytics (or even the need for someone to complete their doctoral dissertation), from our perspective, it is always better to keep one's survey mining options open for future linkage research than to close the proverbial door during each administration window. The same can be said for a variety of other HR- and OD-related tools such as 360 feedback, personality assessments, and performance ratings.

Saari and Scherbaum suggest that unless there is a clear and distinct long-term research agenda from a professional perspective, short-term or temporary-identified surveys should always be used (of course, it is also important to recognize that from the respondent's perspective, there is little difference between a temporary-identified survey and a full-identified survey other than a promise from the survey administrator to remove the individual linkages after completion). The counter argument here is that as long as the appropriate data security protections are in place, we would submit that it is our professional responsibility and in the best interests of the organization's human resources agenda (not to mention alleviating survey fatigue) to maintain that individual data for potential future linkage purposes. In short, we would recommend keeping identified survey data for as long as the information remains potentially relevant for strategic decision making (and again with the appropriate controls in place).

A fourth and final benefit for using confidential or identified surveys is that it provides a number of methodological advantages over anonymous surveys. For example, Saari and Scherbaum advocate the use of unit-level identification for non-longitudinal, employee-level research in order to better support linkage-based analyses. When researching employee-level concepts (e.g., work–life balance, citizenship behavior, turnover), however, collecting information at the unit-level requires significantly more data overall to support the analysis than a confidential approach would require (because the unit-of-measure becomes the workgroup vs. the individual employee). So there is a distinct loss

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of precision when using anonymous surveys, not to mention adding unnecessary error into the equation. In general, we advocate that one should match the data collection approach (i.e., individual level, unit level, etc.) to the criteria or research problem of interest. In addition, retaining individual-level responses over time allows survey researchers to recombine the data to reflect new organizational structures. If the organization restructures shortly after data collection or even 1–3 years later prior to another survey administration, for example, individually identified data can be reanalyzed against the new organization realities (of course, only for concepts that allow for such recombinations). Unit-level data approaches do not permit this.

Managing Survey Expectations

Respondent Perceptions

Regardless of the potential utility of using identified surveys for the practitioner, as Saari and Scherbaum point out, there is the reaction of the respondent to consider. Conventional wisdom and results from the market research literature cited by these authors seem to support the concept that survey respondents feel more comfortable completing anonymous surveys. The assumption here is that the data will be more honest and accurate.

Although this makes sense on the surface, we wonder whether the research in this area has kept pace with the changes in technology and society, not to mention generational differences in privacy expectations of the current and future employee base. Few people, for example, would likely be in favor of the wholesale violation of their data privacy, but the reality is that the proliferation of information and social technology in its many forms (e.g., the Internet, cell phones, text messaging, and social media applications) has resulted in much greater acceptance levels among the Generation Y population regarding the use and sharing of information (Choney, 2010). Although the long-term consequences of these changes is not yet known, and the impact of Facebook and other social networking sites as a potential employee screening process is only now being examined by researchers (for more on this agenda, see the 2011 special issue of the *Journal of Business & Psychology* [Church, 2011] on the state of the practice), the so-called digital generation, and even some of those of the lost Generation X, has embraced the on-demand data-driven nature of our society (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). They want (and are used to) their voices to be heard. Although aging baby boomers and matures may have serious concerns with the confidentiality of their responses, only time will tell whether the incoming talent pools share the same trepidation.

In some ways, the energy inherent in the debate over the impact of confidential versus anonymous data collection methods is similar to the now largely defunct debate of just a decade ago between the more traditional paper versus online survey methodologies. Although both researchers and practitioners debated the merits and pitfalls of online surveys, in the end the use of online technology became commonplace due to the convenience, accuracy, cost, and speed of online surveys. We purport that we are on the cusp of the same tipping point here (if not beyond)—that confidential (or identified) surveys are the standard for many of the reasons cited above.

Survey Sponsor Expectations

Senior leadership and survey sponsor expectations of data integrity are also often a concern that needs to be addressed regardless of the method of data collection. Although it is beholden on the practitioner to guide the organization toward the optimal solution given the current cultural context (and we agree with Saari & Scherbaum that there are clear instances where an anonymous approach may be the best one for a given situation), often leaders feel the need to be assured that the integrity of the data is protected from other factors as it gives them greater confidence

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in internalizing and taking action on the results. However, we would contend that the majority of business leaders do not fully understand the difference (or the debate) between identified versus anonymous survey efforts. Of course as with any choice, their response to the explanation of the pros and cons of each approach will largely be influenced by the manner in which they are presented. Some will want to sacrifice accuracy in order to obtain perceived honesty, whereas others may select the opposite approach, feeling comfortable that a third party can adequately protect the confidentiality of their employees' responses. In short, it's all in the context of the situation.

Response Behavior

Saari and Scherbaum also appropriately address the issue of response behavior, citing research that suggests that response behavior in identified surveys tends to be ''more positive, more socially desirable, less honest, and/or of lower quality.'' Although we don't disagree with the research and the authors' concerns, we wonder if this issue is akin to worrying about the ''small stuff.'' Our collective experience in this area has been that employee survey results tend to show large amounts of variance across the unique concepts being measured. In fact, concepts like work–life balance and base pay tend to receive unfavorable ratings from respondents regardless of which organization they are a member. If confidential surveys were significantly and dramatically impacting respondent behavior, we feel that survey practitioners and their clients would take notice of this issue and begin questioning their results more pervasively than they are today. Instead, survey results seem to be consistent with, and indeed embraced by, senior leaders as representing the pulse of the workforce. Moreover, as Saari and Scherbaum point out, the advancements in linkage research over the past few decades (some of which have likely used identified survey data if the linkage was made at the individual level) have yielded employee attitude relationships with a variety of organizational measures, making the need for the confidential approach to surveys that more meaningful for senior leaders in organizations.

Final Comments

Overall, we agree with Saari and Scherbaum on the important role that surveys play in measuring organizational attributes and driving change efforts, as well as the need to ensure that practitioners approach the process in a transparent and forthright manner with respondents. In the right hands, this technology is fantastic for providing quick and easy access to actionable information and insights. In the wrong hands (what we have termed as ''rogue survey administrators''), it can be disastrous, as many have learned when using identified e-mail addresses with popular online tools. We have heard on several occasions someone state after the fact, ''wow, I didn't realize I would be able to see their results this way.''

Unfortunately, these individuals can easily engage in survey efforts without any thought or consideration for the type of data they intend on collecting or to what end that information will be used. Therefore, as Saari and Scherbaum suggest, it is critical that we establish better, more stringent, and perhaps most importantly more visible standards regarding the use of surveys in organizations. Although the Council of American Survey Research Organization's (CASRO's, 2011) Code of Standards and Ethics for Survey Research is the closest thing currently available in this regard, we believe that the code is not sufficiently focused on the unique context of employee research. Although the issues surrounding confidential versus anonymous surveys are important, we see the real value of a set of guidelines or standards around employee survey practice being a focus on the entire spectrum of survey practice—particularly with respect to data cleaning, item writing, feedback, insights and analysis methods, and action planning. Saari and Scherbaum have raised some interesting and important

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issues here, but we would like to see these concepts expanded further, as well as other important areas explored.

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