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RESPONSE

Identified Employee Surveys: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Abstract

The goal of our focal article was to open up a discussion within our profession on a new trend called identified surveys. We feel that we have achieved this goal with the varied and interesting commentaries. At the same time, we do not feel discussion is enough. We as a profession need to better understand the implications and use of identified surveys. We have an obligation to inform others and to have a point of view on how they should be used, taking into account not just an organizational perspective but the point of view of employees as well.

Our focal article on identified employee surveys generated insightful commentaries from some of the leading figures and leading companies in the employee survey field. The commentators offer a wide range of perspectives, and there is a lot to be learned from them. As a set of papers, the commentaries move the discussion on identified employee surveys forward, and they provide insights and examples of best practices. There is a lot of common ground, but there are also some key differences and important qualifications. In the following sections, we highlight some of the major themes that emerged as well as where agreement and disagreement exist.

Are Identified Surveys Useful?

As we note in the focal article, identified surveys, which collect and *retain* unique identifying information on each survey respondent, can be useful. It is a point on which we and all of the commentators are in agreement. However, there seems to be a mischaracterization of our position by some commentators. In no way do we believe that identified surveys are not useful. We have been in situations where identified surveys were exceptionally useful and needed to answer the specific organizational question. We have also experienced situations where they were not needed and those where they would not have been appropriate. Our position is simply that identified surveys are useful but are not always needed or appropriate.

We also believe that the calls by several commentators (e.g., Chau & Dwight, 2011; Morris & Ashworth, 2011; Weiner, Jolton, Dorio, Klein, & Herman, 2011) for the greater use of identified surveys need to be qualified. The commentaries come from highly experienced and regarded industrial–organizational (I–O) professionals with descriptions of how they carry out identified surveys and in what contexts

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(i.e., organizations with a positive history of professionally conducted employee surveys, high trust environments, full disclosure and choice for employees, and highly qualified I–O experts close by to ensure everything is done very professionally; e.g., Biga, McCance, & Massman, 2011; Black, Hyland, & Rutigliano, 2011; Church & Rotolo, 2011; Jako, 2011). In these situations, we agree that identified surveys could be very appropriate. However, not all situations are the same as those described by our commentators. The commentators represent the best of our profession and their experiences may not readily generalize to the entire population of survey professionals (many of whom are not I–O psychologists). We argue that it is important to recognize that there are many situations where the context and practices are very different than those of the commentators. In these situations, identified surveys may not be appropriate or may not be carried out professionally. We need to ensure that the advocacy for surveys that retain unique identifying information is balanced and fully considers whether they are appropriate or necessary.

Are Identified Surveys Necessary to Support Strategic Decisions?

A number of the commentators implicitly or explicitly suggest that identified surveys are needed to support strategic insights and decisions as well as demonstrate the value of I–O and survey professionals. Their underlying logic is that the ability to link survey data and conduct analyses at the individual level is essentially the only way to provide insights to support strategic decisions. We agree that identified surveys can help with strategic decisions and demonstrate value. We disagree that they are needed to serve these purposes, and there is a long history of linkage research that suggests otherwise. The major groundbreaking work in our field on linkage research was (and continues to be) carried out at the unit level and did not use identified surveys (Rucci, Kirn, & Quinn, 1998; Ryan, Schmit, & Johnson, 1996; Schneider, Ashworth, Higgs, & Carr, 1996; Schneider & Bowen, 1985; Schneider, Macey, Lee, & Young, 2009; Wiley & Campbell, 2006). This seminal research demonstrated that statistical relationships between employee attitudes and important business outcome measures, including financial and customer measures, can be achieved without individual-level identification of survey respondents.

Numerous successful companies conduct unit-level linkage analyses to assist with strategic decisions without using identified surveys. These companies range from Starbucks to IBM, where one of the authors worked as director of global workforce research (Colihan & Saari, 2000; Saari & Judge, 2004). In the case of IBM, many analyses were conducted that were valuable and assisted strategic decisions without individually identified data; these included how employee attitudes related to revenue growth, market share, and customer satisfaction. Among companies with respected survey programs, many do *not* have identified surveys. On the basis of our knowledge of the Mayflower Group (a consortium of *Fortune* 100 companies that conduct professional surveys), only a small number of member companies use identified surveys. In addition, although some of these companies temporarily identify employees to verify that they were sampled to take the survey or to add in demographics, they actively choose not to retain the unique identifier (i.e., they do not make it an identified survey by retaining identification, even though they could easily do so). Interestingly, even Facebook, a strong proponent of openness and with a very young workforce, has an anonymous employee survey.

The notion that identified surveys are required to support strategic decisions is not in line with the reality that many successful and admired organizations are not using identified surveys yet are leaders in using survey data to support strategic decisions. We would also propose that top management in many organizations

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is more interested in how employee attitudes statistically relate to business outcome measures (which do not need identified surveys) than the more HR-centric ''employee life cycle'' research that statistically relates various individual-level HR data on employees (with employee attitude data in the mix). As Cascio and Boudreau (2008) note, ''[i]n most organizations, the fundamental strategic issues involve business-unit or work-group performance'' (pp. 133). Of course, there may be strategic decisions about people that will require identified data. However, the argument that strategic decisions cannot be supported without identified surveys is not the case. The necessity depends on the strategic question. Again, we agree that identified surveys can be useful for many organizational questions but feel that strong arguments and advocacy for increased use need to be qualified to reflect the fact that they are not required to answer many important organizational questions.

What About the Employee Perspective?

We think more appreciation for and focus on the employee perspective is needed. Some of the commentators argued that there are many benefits of identified surveys. However, other than the benefit of employees saving a few minutes by not needing to answer demographic questions, the benefits they described focus exclusively on the organization. In line with Froelich (2011), we would propose that in addition to an organizational perspective, an employee perspective is needed, is consistent with the values of our profession, and is not fully understood at this point.

One set of commentators explicitly argue (and others implicitly argue) that employee surveys are simply like any other information that employers collect and maintain at the individual level; thus, employees don't or shouldn't care. As we noted in the focal article, the data from the market research and public opinion literature find that people do in fact care about the privacy of their information, how it is used, and that they have choice and control over their personal information (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009; Graeff & Harmon, 2002; Madden & Smith, 2010; Singer, Mathiowetz, & Couper, 1993; Singer, Van Hoewyk, & Neugebauer, 2003). In many of these domains, there is less potential consequence to the individual if data is disclosed or not used appropriately than exists for an employee of an organization. Moreover, recent longitudinal studies suggest that privacy concerns have been increasing over time, not decreasing (Antón, Earp, & Young, 2010). Although research is needed with employee populations specifically, we don't think the conclusion that employees don't care is warranted based on the data from other fields. As well, the notion of trust in the survey process has always been a concern of survey practitioners because without it, the survey will fail.

What Do We Really Know About Employee Reactions to Identified Surveys?

We are pleased that several of the commentators report positively on their use of identified surveys, with no reports of employee concerns or changes in response behavior. Again, we do not know how representative their experiences are of the entire population of survey vendors and organizations using identified surveys. We find it encouraging that several of the commentators have conducted case studies and have started to examine data on employee reactions and behavior. We applaud their efforts and encourage them to share this research with our profession by submitting it for publication. The data they describe are a good start, but at this point, we believe that any definitive conclusions drawn from their experiences and data would be premature. A few studies that fail to reject the null hypothesis of no differences in reactions and behavior do not prove the null hypothesis to be true.

As several commentators point out (e.g., Black et al., 2011; Fein & Kulik, 2011;

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Weiner et al., 2011), more research on employee reactions and behavior is needed, and we agree completely. Research and theory on how employees perceive survey identification practices, how they react to them, how they behave under differing levels of identification and different ways in which the identification is achieved, as well as how are contextual factors moderating the relationship is clearly needed. For example, how does the level of identification affect responses to questions based on the sensitivity of the survey item? Employees may respond differently to survey items on intention to stay at the company, ratings of manager effectiveness, and sexual orientation when taking an identified survey. These are important questions that we don't have answers to at this point. We suggest that theory and research on organizational trust, organizational culture and climate, justice theory, attribution theory, and psychological contracts could be useful approaches for understanding reactions and behavior. The selection research on employee reactions is an example of how this research could proceed (e.g., Harris, Van Hoye, & Lievens, 2003; Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004; Ryan & Ployhart, 2000).

In addition to conducting relevant research, we also need to be drawing more heavily on the basic research that currently exists in considering questions around identified surveys. As we noted in the focal article, studies from a number of fields have found that when survey participants perceive less anonymity, their survey ratings become more positive, more socially desirable, less honest, or of lower quality (Bowling, 2005; Durant, Carey, & Schroder, 2002; Heerwegh, Vanhove, Matthijs, & Loosveldt, 2005; Rosenfeld, Booth-Kewley, Edwards, & Thomas, 1996; Sashkin & Prien, 1996; Turner et al., 1998), although the size of the impact varies from study to study. It is likely that contextual and design and implementation factors are moderating these observed relationships. Although we do not know all of the potential moderators, the commentaries suggest that the level of trust in the organization, the history of employee surveys in the organization, and whether the organization has informed employees and given them choice to take the survey are possibilities for moderators to consider. In addition, as Luong (2011) points out in her commentary, understanding these questions requires that we take an expanded view of context to include factors such as culture to make better decisions about when and where identified surveys are appropriate.

Our speculation is that the more positive the context (e.g., high trust environment; positive history of employee surveys and thoughtful, professional design/implementation features), the smaller the impact. Given that the commentators represent leaders and the best of the survey profession, we wonder if their lack of results may stem from these potential moderators. They are clearly engaged in the best design and implementation features (along the lines of the guidelines we are suggesting be developed for our profession and others), and they also work in organizations with long histories of surveying and building trust. If our speculation is correct, it would identify an important boundary condition of when identified surveys will have no impact and when they will have an impact. This knowledge will help make decisions about when identified surveys are appropriate and when they are not.

Using Identified Surveys to Address Unanticipated Questions

One of the benefits of identified surveys that several commentators note is that post hoc or future questions that were not anticipated can be answered. We agree that identified surveys can provide flexibility in these types of situations. However, some qualifications are needed as this benefit raises potential professional and ethical issues and could potentially violate the Safe Harbor principles. The Safe Harbor principle of notice requires that information about how the data will be used is provided to survey respondents before the data are collected. Thus, if a survey

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was initially described for one purpose (e.g., identification to add in demographic information), it will violate this principle if it is later used for other purposes (e.g., linking attitudes to other data obtained on employees). If this situation arises, the survey data can be used for those new questions if survey respondents were given notice and choice related to the new uses of the data. In these cases, permission to use the data for the new questions would need to be obtained prior to using the data. Only data from those that opt in could be used. Using the data without obtaining permission for these unanticipated uses clearly raises ethical concerns and would be in violation of Safe Harbor. Of course, all of this assumes that the employees were informed that their data is identified in the first place. Retaining identifiers without informing employees is not an ethical practice (e.g., Hausdorf, 2011).

If there is truly a need to have flexibility later on, users of surveys should engage in careful thought about current and potential future uses of individually identifiable information so that employees can be fully informed and given choice at initial data collection. If one has not done this, we would suggest that identified survey data will not be useful for unanticipated questions as attempting to get permission after the fact will not be feasible and would probably take too long. The best practices shared by the commentators provide a road map of how one can balance the need to answer post hoc unanticipated questions and still act in a manner consistent with our professional values as well as Safe Harbor. As with some of the other benefits of identified surveys, qualifications are needed. Identified surveys are only useful for post hoc unanticipated questions when the survey was executed with the anticipation that there would be additional uses of the data (and described in the original notice to the employees). We would suggest that if careful thought is given to all of the potential future uses of the survey data there will be fewer unanticipated questions.

As the Profession Most Aligned to Employee Surveys, Should We Have Guidelines on the Use of Identified Surveys?

Although not all of the commentators agree (e.g., Morris & Ashworth, 2011), we believe that as the profession with the most expertise in employee surveys, we should have a point of view on identified surveys and provide some professional practice guidelines. We are not suggesting something that is elevated to the pseudo-legal status of the *Uniform Guidelines* or the *Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures*. In the domain of surveys, we have very little to point to about what should and should not be done. Many companies are fortunate enough to work with I–O psychologists such as our commentators who do engage in professional practice and will step in when things are not being done appropriately. As Black et al. (2011) note, I–O psychologists are especially equipped to handle these types of issues professionally and ethically. However, not all surveys are run by I–O psychologists. We believe that the profession has an obligation to help ensure that employee surveys are done professionally and ethically regardless of who administers them, much as we do for employee assessments in staffing and performance evaluation. Understanding, collecting, and sharing what we have learned about how surveys should be done professionally seems to be the right thing to do as a profession. We believe that commentators on this focal article have done just that. There is a lot that can be learned from the experiences and practices that they shared. As Church and Rotolo (2011) argue, there is a need for a much broader set of professional practice recommendations and guidelines. If we as a profession are not willing to take the lead, who will?

Closing Thoughts

In closing, there are potential benefits to identified surveys, but there are many qualifications to these benefits that need serious

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consideration especially when advocating for increased use of them. We believe that they can be useful and appropriate in the right context. However, not all contexts require identified surveys or would be appropriate for their use. Identified surveys should be done with careful thought, in the appropriate organizational contexts (yet we don't know exactly what those are at this point), and with the employee in mind as well as the organization. Consistent with ethical guidelines, we also propose that employees should be fully informed that they are taking a survey that will keep unique identifying information on them, and they should be given a choice. We believe that the practices shared by our commentators be strongly considered by anyone contemplating an identified survey. As the commentators point out, we have a lot to learn about the implications of identified surveys on employee reactions and behavior. We believe that it is an area where academic and practitioner collaborations would be especially fruitful. Finally, we believe that SIOP, representing the profession with the most expertise on employee surveys, should have professional guidelines on the use of identified employee surveys for our 7,000+ SIOP members and the countless others outside of our profession who are using employee surveys.

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