

# The Ultimate Guide to Employee Engagement Surveys

Learn why your organization can benefit from employee engagement surveys and how to effectively execute and act on them.




# Forward

A recent study by Gallup reveals that only 34 percent of U.S. workers are engaged. While we can attribute this high level of disengagement to several factors, the impact is something all business leaders and managers should be concerned with.

Companies in the U.S. realize over 85 percent of their value from the contributions of their people, so when more than 65 percent of the workforce is not actively engaged, the costs become astronomical. In fact, Gallup estimates the cost of disengaged employees for U.S. companies to be over \$400 billion. Yes, billion.

But what can we do about it? There's an old saying that "what gets measured gets managed" so in that spirit, many companies are turning to engagement surveys to understand employee engagement at their company and what's driving the overall sentiment. We wrote this comprehensive guide to help you jump-start the practice within your organization.



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## **Ultimate Guides** by Reflektive

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# 1

## Engagement is Broken

Companies continue to prioritize employee engagement, investing nearly \$720 million annually on efforts to improve engagement.

Despite these efforts, employee engagement is still an issue for many organizations. And one of the most common and costly engagement methods — employee surveys — hasn't delivered on its promise of leading to a more engaged workforce.

Because they are often optional, 70 percent of employees don't respond to annual engagement surveys. This could be due to a belief held by nearly 30 percent that the surveys are useless.

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**70% of employees don't respond to engagement surveys.**

What's worse is 80 percent of employees don't believe managers or company leaders will act on survey data.

Does this mean employee engagement surveys are obsolete? Definitely not, but it is time to address that they're broken and find out what we can do to fix them in order to increase engagement and employee sentiment.

With proper engagement surveys, HR leaders have a real opportunity to influence their employees' wellbeing as well as their company's bottom line. With that, let's examine why surveys aren't helping engagement.

**1 They Aren't Consistent Enough**

**2 They Ask the Wrong Questions**

**3 They Don't Spur Action**

### **They Aren't Consistent Enough**

Employee engagement surveys are designed to help companies and managers understand employees' perception of their work environment and the extent to which they are engaged and committed to their work

environment. But can organizations really get an accurate pulse on engagement purely with annual surveys?

Much like annual performance reviews — which companies are abandoning more and more— annual employee engagement surveys need to evolve. Not only do responses tend to have recency bias, where employees focus on what’s happened lately instead of having a more holistic perspective, but annual surveys also don’t align with today’s business environment.

In the era of constant data collection, real-time analytics, and iterative work processes, companies need more consistent assessments to accurately measure engagement and inform their decisions.

HR leaders can supplement annual engagement surveys with follow up pulse surveys to gauge sentiment on specific areas during the in between months following the big survey.

## They Ask the Wrong Questions

Regardless of how often you survey employees, if you ask the wrong questions, you’ll never be able to accurately assess and improve engagement. Many survey questions ask about employee’s thoughts, feelings, and motives. Though these types of questions may measure employee satisfaction, they often elicit subjective

responses and don’t indicate what drives engagement.

Survey questions also tend to be vague, making it difficult for companies to understand the real, underlying issues. Take this common employee engagement question for example: “Does your manager value the talents and the contributions you make?” Not only is it subjective, but it’s also difficult to pinpoint the issue, which you must do in order to make improvements. Consider a more specific question, such as: “How often do you receive recognition from your manager for your accomplishments?” It’s specific, less subjective, and measures observable behavior rather than feelings.

Another common issue with engagement survey questions is that they don’t have a clear path to action. Surveys should include questions that produce behavioral data that can be analyzed and verified, and reveal organizational or management problems that impact engagement. **Simply put: each question should be...**

- ☑ Meaningful
- ☑ Measurable
- ☑ Actionable

**It's one thing to measure engagement, it's another to implement changes to improve engagement.**

### **They Don't Spur Action**

A surefire way to keep engagement scores low is to do nothing with the survey results. It's one thing to measure engagement, it's another to implement changes to improve engagement.

The biggest reason employee engagement surveys are broken is inaction by company leaders. Presenting the results in a fancy infographic with pie charts is nice, but it does little to actually move the needle.

Of course, implementing change from survey data isn't easy, especially if the survey is annual. It often takes several weeks to analyze results, develop a course of action, and then a few months to implement changes. (Don't worry — we'll cover tips on acting on your data later in this E-book.)

If companies can be more nimble with their response, finding simple ways to make incremental improvements while developing solutions for bigger issues will show employees that their voice is being heard and the survey had a purpose.

At the end of the day, employee engagement is an ongoing process that requires all parties to be engaged in improving it. Surveys are just one piece of the puzzle, but when done correctly, they can be a helpful tool in improving engagement and company performance. will show employees that their voice is being heard and the survey had a purpose.

At the end of the day, employee engagement is an ongoing process that requires all parties to be “engaged” in improving it. Surveys are just one piece of the puzzle, but when done correctly, they can be a helpful tool in improving engagement and worth the investment.

**If your organization already uses engagement surveys, skip ahead to page 13 to see six ways to improve your surveys!**

# 2

## Why Your Organization Needs Engagement Surveys

If you haven't conducted an employee survey before, getting started can be rife with questions: What should questions should we include? How do we avoid bias and get the most out of a survey? Will people actually participate and share their experience? Should it be anonymous? Perhaps the most pressing question of all: Why even do an employee survey? It's helpful to understand what an

employee survey measures before diving into the why behind conducting it. The main function of the employee survey is to assess: The level of employee engagement and factors that may drive it, how satisfied employees are with their compensation, benefits, growth opportunities and work environment, and the effectiveness of management and leadership.

### The main function of the employee survey is to assess:



The level of employee engagement and what may drive it



How satisfied employees are with their compensation, benefits, and work environment



The effectiveness of management and leadership

These areas of investigation give a high-level sketch of the employee experience and identify places for further research or improvement — extremely valuable information for HR leaders and their organizations.


**Here are our top 5 reasons you should start asking employees about their experience at work with surveys:**

### **1 Engagement is tied to productivity**

Companies in the US realize over 85 percent of their value from the contributions of people, so optimizing employee engagement and performance is essential to business success.

Engaged employees are more satisfied and invested in the success of their organization, and they typically go on to become top performers. Why? Well, engagement implies an emotional commitment on the employee's behalf, which means they use their extra energy and attention at work rather than just “doing their job” and clocking out at the end of the day. Research from the Harvard Business Review also shows that engagement leads to greater innovation, lower turnover, and more productive people.

All this to say, surveys remain one of the best ways to measure these critical metrics, but naturally, they only work if you do them right.



**Over 85% of a company's value comes from the contributions of people.**

### **2 Increase Communication**

The feedback from an employee survey can be a catalyst for authentic dialogue and impactful change. Most people will feel more comfortable being honest in a confidential forum as opposed to a more formal venue, such as an interview or face-to-face conversation. Surveys should also be designed to minimize bias to ensure that the data gleaned from them is more open and candid.

At the outset, having an option to provide honest feedback will help employees feel more heard and valued. From there, leaders can build on the results of the survey to keep communication flowing and demonstrate that they are reacting to employees' needs.


### **3 Improve Retention**

High turnover can be detrimental to a company's success. Because replacing employees is so expensive, maintaining a high retention rate of skilled, engaged people can be life or death in some industries. As it turns out, employees with low engagement are four times more likely to quit than their high-scoring counterparts. And it's not just low-performers that product low engagement scores. High-performers can also be



disengaged and present significant flight risks to your organization.

This paints a grim picture, but insights from employee surveys can and should be used to create an action plan for your company to avoid high turnover, especially for your most productive workers.



**Employees with low engagement are 4X more likely to quit than their high-scoring counterparts.**

#### **4 Identify Areas Where Things are Working**

On the other side, surveys can also be used to find and share institutional knowledge of best practices. There may be hidden pockets of high engagement or positive experience that other parts of the organization can learn from. By rewarding and elevating good practices, leaders can ensure they take root across the business. This is a great opportunity to utilize your company's Recognition wall to highlight high performers and culture champions to increase morale.

As an HR leader, you should also be empowering managers and leaders in high-scoring parts of the organization to teach their peers. The sharing of best practices leads to many positive effects with low additional costs.

#### **5 Create Baselines to Stay Accountable**

Tracking is essential to any change or improvement effort within an organization. If you don't know where you're starting from, how can you know down the road that your time and energy yielded any results? Employee surveys create a baseline of engagement, satisfaction, and effectiveness metrics to measure against and track over time. The initial picture may or may not be pretty, but either way, having a baseline is important to work from.

As you delve into exploring the employee experience, keep in mind that surveys are not an opportunity to punish respondents and should never be used for retribution. Uncovering issues during your investigation doesn't mean it's time to start finger-pointing. Playing the blame game using survey results undermines trust among all levels of an organization and will impact your ability to get honest, actionable feedback moving forward.

On the contrary, surveys are a great business tool for learning and growth when leaders use them in a positive manner. Engagement surveys should move the company toward delivering a positive work experience for everyone. Employers have more control over this than they realize and stand to reap the benefits when people are passionate and excited about their work.

# 3

## The Anatomy and Framework of Engagement Surveys

It can be daunting to figure out how to design your first engagement survey. There are many resources out there with recommendations and templates for building engagement surveys, but how can you be sure that they will work for your company?

We partnered with Stanford Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resources, Hayagreeva Rao, to craft a research-backed framework that will help you drive real results from your engagement surveys. Rao is also the co-author of the award winning book, *Scaling Up Excellence*, which is a Wall Street Journal Best Seller.

### Definitions

Let's start with the basics. Engagement surveys are generally run company-wide once or twice per year and typically consist of 20-50 questions.

As a follow up for annual or semi-annual engagement surveys, HR may choose to run pulse surveys. These should be about 5-10 questions used to take a pulse on the biggest influencers of engagement.



**Hayagreeva Rao**  
Stanford Professor of Organizational  
Behavior and Human Resources

They can also be a great way to measure the success of any actions you may have taken on survey data to determine whether they had a positive impact on employees.

### Engagement Measures vs. Engagement Drivers

Before you start crafting your engagement questions, you'll need to recognize the difference between engagement measures and engagement drivers and the factors that influence them. Engagement measures give you answers about how well you've set up your work environment to help people reach their full potential, whereas engagement drivers ask for feedback on how to do better.



## The Reflektive Engagement Survey Framework

We recommend a ratio of **one measure question for every seven driver questions**.

Here are four recommended questions you should include to effectively measure engagement:

- 1** I would recommend my company to a friend as a great place to work
- 2** I feel comfortable telling friends that my company has great products or services
- 3** You'll probably see me working at my company two years from now
- 4** I work harder at my company than I have at past companies

Once you've asked your measurement questions, you'll move into the engagement driver questions.



**These are seven categories that drive engagement in your workplace:**

- 1** Performance Drive
- 2** Culture of Feedback
- 3** Performance Management
- 4** Leadership
- 5** Cultural Health
- 6** Career Growth
- 7** Management

Your remaining questions should address each of these drivers. We recommend about 30 questions on engagement drivers to make sure all themes are addressed.

This engagement survey framework will ensure that your organization has all of their bases covered when it comes to gauging your current employee engagement. If you've already run engagement surveys at your company, check out the next section for a few ways to improve them.

# 4

## How to Improve Your Existing Engagement Surveys

If your organization is already using engagement surveys, well done! As we know, simply sending out a survey once a year won't do much in terms of moving the needle on engagement. Here are six key considerations with engagement surveys that your organization needs to focus on improving in order to constantly increase engagement: Survey Cadence

### Six key considerations to improve engagement surveys

- 1 Survey Cadence
- 2 Survey Length
- 3 Pulse Survey Cadence
- 4 Leadership Alignment
- 5 Cascading Results
- 6 Engagement Follow-up

### 1 Survey Cadence

Figuring out how often to run surveys can be complex. It's time consuming for both employees to take the survey and for organizations to digest and act on the results. You don't want to inundate employees, but you don't want to wait too long in between surveys before you get their feedback again.

That's why we recommend conducting your engagement survey once per year. That may not sound like a lot, but keep reading below for how to supplement with pulse surveys. Any less frequent will render the process ineffective, but any more frequent can be difficult to measure and hold yourself accountable. Once a year gives you enough time to act on your findings and make meaningful change. It also takes a while for the actions to actually impact your engagement score, so you don't want to set unrealistic expectations for your organization and fail to meet them.

## 2 Pulse Survey Cadence

For each engagement survey, a best practice is to follow up with two pulse surveys per year. These short, 5-10 question surveys will help you gain insights on the biggest influencers of engagement in order to keep a pulse on your employees. As an added bonus, these pulse surveys also serve as an additional opportunity for employees to provide feedback on their experience at your organization.

## 3 Survey Length

Survey exhaustion is real. Completion rates plummet and answer fatigue sets in if your survey is too long. When crafting your engagement survey, you should keep length top-of-mind in order to ensure employees are actually engaged while taking the survey. Focus on keeping your survey around 30 questions, taking only about 15 minutes for employees to complete. If you're asking the right questions, 30-35 questions should do the trick.

## 4 Leadership Alignment

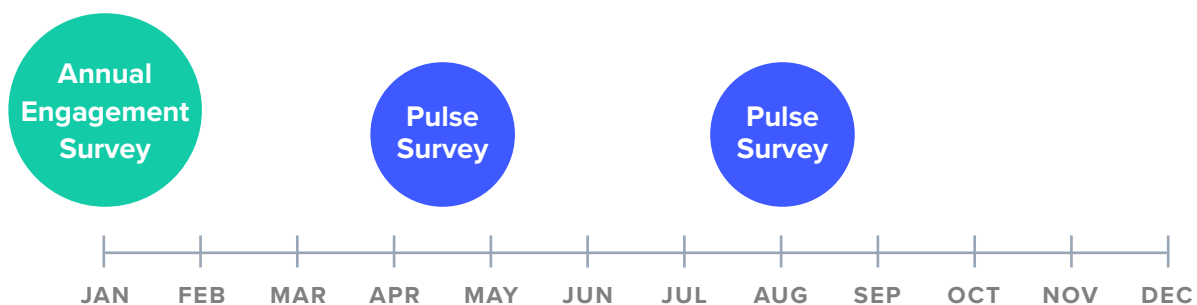
Before launching your engagement survey, you should walk your leadership team through the questions so they're aware of what you'll be analyzing after you collect responses. Not only will this ensure that your C-suite's questions get answered, but it also drives the partnership between HR and leadership while strengthening their buy-in to the results.

**Ask your leaders, "Is this something you're willing to take action on?"**

## 5 Sharing Survey Results

Creating a plan for sharing your survey results is just as important as figuring out what to ask. That's why we recommend cascading the results in this order: C-suite, department heads, and then the entire company. Sharing results in

**Best practice is to follow up with two pulse surveys per year**



a timely manner helps create a culture of feedback and transparency that your employees and managers will appreciate. Walking your C-suite through the results first will ensure buy-in on any action items you propose.

## **6 Engagement Follow-Up**

One of the biggest challenges with running engagement surveys can be driving accountability across your organization on who's owning the follow up. We believe in integrating goals, check-ins, and performance reviews to help keep managers invested in the

# 5

## How to Take Action on Your Survey Data

Now, for the most important (and difficult) parts of running employee engagement surveys: analyzing and acting on the results.

One of the biggest themes in ensuring the success of your engagement surveys is making sure your leadership team is involved in the pre- and post-survey process. Before you analyze your response data, make your leadership team aware of the results. By understanding what's top-of-mind in your C-suite, you'll be able to ensure that the leadership team's questions will be answered and solidify their buy-in.

By involving your leadership team from the beginning, you will ensure that the team is willing to take action on the findings of the survey, which is paramount to the success of the survey as a whole.

If you find there are areas that your leaders are not willing to prioritize

changing, then you will want to remove those questions from the survey.

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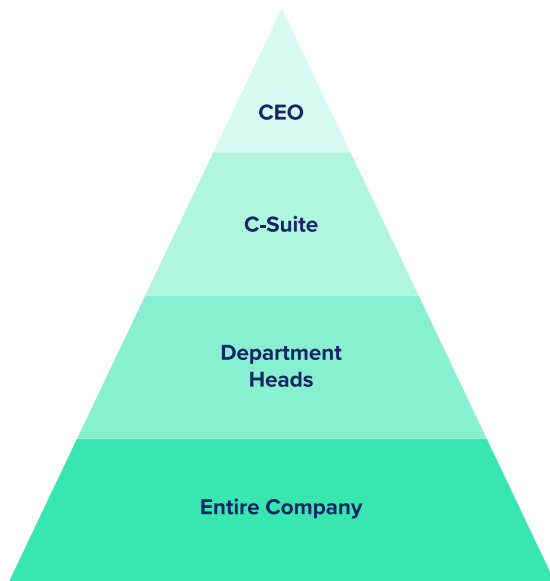
**Everything you ask should be something that you're willing to take action on**

### **Sharing Employee Engagement Results**

Nailing down your plan to share engagement survey results with your company is one of the most important ways to ensure that the data becomes actionable. Don't overlook this step!

We recommend first walking your CEO through the results to understand their concerns and address any questions they may have before you share the data company-wide. This will also allow you to determine how they want to disseminate the rest of the data to employees and managers.





Cascade of Results Sharing

After you've shared the data with the C-suite and department heads, we recommend holding an all-hands meeting to share the results with the rest of the company. It's important to schedule this meeting within a few weeks of the survey so that you signal to employees that you are taking swift action on their feedback.

Encouraging each department to discuss their data in separate team meetings is another great way to make employees feel that their voices are heard. Often times, people are more likely to speak up about their thoughts in smaller group settings, so providing this platform for employees will help managers gather the honest feedback they need.

In the end, remember that the results belong to everyone. They aren't just owned by HR or by the C-suite; every

single member of the company has the power to take action on the results, so by sharing them, you are empowering people to improve their work lives.

## Final Step: Follow Through

### Get Managers Involved

Remember that while HR can drive accountability through managers (with goals, check-ins, performance reviews, etc.), HR cannot drive change in a vacuum. People managers must be given the insights and motivation needed to take action.

Be sure to look at the areas that specific managers scored lower on and work with them individually to set goals to address any issues head-on.

### Get Your Company Involved

To help follow through with the rest of the company, HR should develop engagement action committees to help drive projects and initiatives forward. Not only do these committees help extend engagement involvement to all interested employees, but they also enable collective ownership, which can provide better outcomes.

# 7

## Conclusion

Historically, engagement surveys have been well-intentioned but prone to inaction when it comes to actually inspiring change in organizations. The result? An unempowered HR team and a disengaged workforce with no plan of action.

Luckily, the solutions we overviewed in this E-book will help equip HR leaders and their teams to diagnose low engagement and gain insights to improve engagement in their organizations.

We hope this was a helpful guide for providing context around the importance of engagement surveys in the workplace, and we hope you can use this as a resource to prove why you should implement engagement surveys in your organization.



### Get Started with Engagement

Email [hello@reflektive.com](mailto:hello@reflektive.com)  
or request a demo at  
[www.reflektive.com/demo](http://www.reflektive.com/demo)