

Making Frequent Feedback Work

Harnessing next-generation employee engagement tools.



Since the start of the millennium, there has been a paradigm shift in the way organizations gather feedback from their employees.

The traditional, 20th-century approach was comprehensive and periodic.

Once per year (or every other year), an organization would launch a company-wide survey that would gather opinions across a broad range of topics. It would provide an overall picture of employee engagement and satisfaction, and allow comparisons to be made between different business areas and demographic groups.

Today, organizations are increasingly employing pulse surveys and polls, providing opportunities for employee engagement data to be collected on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis.

So far, so good...

But does more feedback necessarily mean *better* feedback?

What are the risks associated with this dramatic increase in engagement activity? And how can you make sure that the extra data you are accumulating is being used for the greatest impact?

For your organization's new employee engagement approach to be truly effective, the changes in how you gather feedback must be matched by changing how you plan for it, process it, and respond to it.

Over the following pages, we will look at some of the steps you can take to successfully embed regular feedback into your organization, and how to secure the maximum benefit from next-generation employee engagement tools.

How and why have employee engagement surveys changed?

Moving towards ongoing conversations.

The evolution in employee engagement surveys can be viewed as part of a wider trend within organizations towards approaches that are more informal and iterative.

In their performance management processes, for example, organizations have been de-emphasizing formal reviews and focusing instead on ongoing conversations between managers and employees.

Likewise, leadership progression is now viewed less in terms of a series of one-off, role-to-role moves - and more in terms of critical experiences that individuals build continuously over time.

Within employee engagement, this trend has manifested itself most obviously in the drive to supplement - or in some cases, replace - the periodic survey with more frequent pulse surveys and polls.

Feedback-gathering is not limited to major annual events, but rather, something that happens less formally, and more frequently, throughout the year.



The factors driving these shifts in approach are part-strategic and part-practical.

From a strategic point of view, the old models are seen by some as insufficiently responsive to the dynamic nature of today's work environments and experiences. As a stand-alone event, the giant, annual survey is viewed as too cumbersome for a fast, and ever-changing world.

From a practical perspective, the new approaches are easier to manage and less time-consuming. In many cases, they are a straightforward reaction to the fact that past practice hasn't always worked. Indeed, there are some specific advantages to be gained by gathering more continuous feedback; for example, when monitoring key metrics or gaining insight into emerging issues or areas of significant organizational change.

Another major factor driving the trend towards more frequent feedback is, of course, technology. In today's digitally-enabled environment, it is quicker and easier than ever to deploy employee engagement surveys.

This, in turn, has led to many organizations surveying their employees on a regular basis without considering the wider implications of doing so (the assumption being that more feedback is a good thing).

However, and as we will see on the following page, there are some potential risks associated with gathering regular employee feedback - and these are likely to worsen if organizations adopt next-generation engagement tools without also cultivating a robust culture around their use.

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Has the annual survey had its day?

With the focus moving away from major, periodic interventions in favor of a more agile and iterative approach, it may seem like a natural next step to drop the periodic, comprehensive survey altogether. However this might be a serious miscalculation.

Why annual surveys are still valuable.

At Korn Ferry, we believe the annual survey still has an important role to play in any successful employee engagement strategy. Unlike pulse-surveys, it allows you to collect input across a broad cross-section of employees on a wide array of topics, all at the same time.

In doing so, employers gain a unique opportunity to understand what aspects of work environments and experiences are most critical for motivating employees, and how to enable high levels of performance at both an individual and organizational level.

Enhanced analytics can help identify areas of elevated risk that may be either underestimated or missed altogether.

What are the potential pitfalls of more regular feedback?

Advances in feedback technology have made it easier than ever for organizations to collect regular input from employees.

Surveys can now be planned and deployed within hours, or even minutes, with opinions gathered on any topic, at any time, with minimal effort and cost.

At first, it is hard to see any downsides to this.

However, in our experience, there are a number of issues that can arise when organizations move to a more frequent feedback model.

1. Feedback fatigue.

If employees are being bombarded with different types of surveys throughout the year, they can quickly become overwhelmed with the feedback process and either decline to take part or, perhaps worse, engage with it begrudgingly, affording little consideration to the answers they give.



2. Disillusionment

One of the most common (and more serious) criticisms we hear from people involved in employee engagement surveys is that they do not lead to any concrete actions: "I provide feedback, but nothing happens."

If your organization, has not been successful in connecting feedback with positive change, then this problem will not be solved by gathering more feedback. In fact, increasing the frequency of your engagement surveys, may only make it worse.

3. Overreaction.

It is also essential to consider whether your organization is properly set up to receive continual input, and respond to it effectively.

Pulse surveys always carry a risk of overreaction, especially if leaders and managers mistake temporary changes for long-term trends. For example: the stock market changes day to day, but the general trend over time signals whether a bull or bear market is in place.

Similarly, leaders and managers need to focus upon consistent signals gained from employee feedback to ensure they aren't reacting to chance fluctuations or "noise".

Making frequent feedback work.

Enabled and encouraged by today's listening technology, many organizations have already made the transition from periodic comprehensive surveys to a "frequent feedback" model.

However, our focus at Korn Ferry, is upon helping clients reach the next stage in the process, which we like to think of as making frequent feedback work.

Looking beyond the survey

If Frequent Feedback 1.0 was about making continuous listening possible, then the next logical step is about making continuous listening work.

To do so, means looking beyond the survey technology and thinking strategically about how to gather, manage, and respond to regular employee feedback in an organized and structured way.

There are three key areas we therefore focus upon when supporting organizations to make frequent feedback effective:

One of the questions we are most commonly asked is about what should be measured and when.





1. Understand what to monitor and measure in order to get the right insights.

Given that most organizations now have the technological capability to gather feedback from employees on any subject at any time, it is not surprising that one of the questions we are most commonly asked is about what should be measured and when. For example:

- What aspects of work environments are most critical to foster high levels of engagement, drive individual and team performance, and support strategic objectives?
- Should surveys regularly address the same topics?
- How frequently should they be deployed?
- Does feedback need to be gathered from all employees, or is sampling more effective?
- How should we interpret the feedback?
- How do we compare to organizations like ours?

Using validated frameworks and normative benchmarks, we help our clients organize their survey activities in a way that is most likely to secure them the insights they need.



2. Successfully navigate the associated cultural shifts.

If your approach to employee feedback is changing, then the culture surrounding employee feedback must change as well.

Frequent surveys need to be matched by regular communication, whether that be by sharing news of actions influenced by feedback, or making references to employee input at every town hall.

It can also be helpful to create a brand identity for high-priority surveys or polls that go out regularly (using distinctive logos and titles that connect with organizational goals). This can support a culture of frequent feedback within your organization, and also make it easier for employees to connect their input with progress being made.

3. Connect feedback efforts with wider organizational and talent considerations.

The ultimate goal of employee engagement surveys should be to understand factors in the work environment that affect important organizational goals and objectives.

Success, is not about ticking boxes or fixing bad scores. It is about integrating survey feedback with ongoing business activities, and allowing the data to enrich - and be enriched by - wider organizational and talent considerations.

This last point is perhaps the most crucial of all. It is only by connecting feedback efforts with wider organizational objectives that you can transform your survey insights into effective actions. And it is only by demonstrably turning insight into action that you will be able to maintain confidence in the feedback process and fend off "survey fatigue".

The importance of a connected approach.

We have seen how important it is to connect feedback efforts with wider organizational objectives. But what does this mean in practice, and what benefits can such connectedness bring?

To answer this question, let's look in more detail at some of the ways in which a connected feedback approach might be used to tackle a specific organizational issue.

The current state of global labour markets means



that retention remains a major concern for many of our clients.

Unsurprisingly, they use pulse surveys to gather information on commitment levels, staying intentions, and other leading indicators of potential employee turnover. In isolation, such survey activity is enough to identify areas of heightened retention risk - whether it be in certain business functions or among particular demographic groups.

When such information is combined with insights and knowledge from elsewhere, however, it can become a powerful driver for positive business change.

Connect survey data to market data

Imagine, for example, that you could marry your findings with wider market data within the industries and roles where candidates are typically the most scarce.

Doing so would give you an ability to prioritize areas of potentially high turnover (especially in those areas that posed a genuine risk to business performance), versus those where departing employees could easily be replaced.

Now imagine being able to compare your areas of high turnover risk with those of other

organizations. In this way, you could determine whether you were dealing with a universal retention issue or whether it was an issue unique to your business and that you could therefore take specific actions to fix.

By combining market insights with other information from your own organization, you can enhance your survey findings even further.

For example, you could integrate your pay data to see how reward levels within areas of potentially high employee turnover compare with industry averages.

You could even use findings from other pay-related surveys to establish whether employees' perceptions of their reward levels matched reality. If pay levels are at, or above, market rates, do employees perceive the value? If pay levels are below market rates, are employee concerns surfacing? And, importantly, are organizational communications and managers helping employees understand the company's reward philosophies and practices?

It is only by connecting data and insights in this way, and by viewing survey findings in their wider business context, that you will be able to gain a true understanding of what the results are telling you and identify actions that will effectively address the issues raised.

Putting theory into practice: Korn Ferry Listen.

At Korn Ferry, we have recently launched Korn Ferry Listen: a new surveys and listening platform that enables organizations to collect and analyze feedback from employees quickly, easily, and in real time.

The platform helps clients maximize engagement and organizational performance by making it possible for them to gain actionable insight into employees' perceptions whenever they need it. Users can select participants based on any available combination of demographics and launch multiple surveys within minutes.

However, this is not just about speed and convenience.

The platform has been intentionally designed to help our clients avoid the potential pitfalls of regular feedback, and gain maximum benefit from



their pulse surveys and polls. A brief look at the some of the platform's features helps illustrate how frequent feedback can work in practice.

Organizing survey activities in an optimal way

Users of Korn Ferry Listen can choose to create surveys in two different ways.

If there are business-specific issues they wish to address, they can opt to create their own, bespoke survey content

Alternatively, they can select from a suite of pre-existing Korn Ferry surveys, all of which have been proven to generate the data and deep insights organizations need.

The availability of validated survey content on the platform ensures that employers can gather feedback from employees on key topics in a way that is likely to deliver maximum insight.

Creating a strong culture of regular feedback

If you are seeking to establish a regular feedback culture within your organization, then a poor or frustrating survey experience is one thing that is guaranteed to undermine your efforts.

On Korn Ferry Listen, we provide a streamlined survey experience, making it more likely that employees will want to take part.

This includes providing multi-lingual capabilities to enable users to complete surveys and provide feedback in their language of choice.

We have also taken measures to secure the confidentiality of feedback collected in order to ensure participants are confident in the process. There is also an in-built functionality to aid organizations's compliance with GDPR.

Turning feedback data into actionable insights

Korn Ferry Listen features an online dashboard which allows users to view results in real time. Users can leverage the platform's advanced data aggregation capabilities to drill down further into the survey results; for example, using demographic filtering to explore patterns within and across population groups.

Users can also compare data groups against internal and external benchmarks. These critical elements have been included to help users put their survey findings into context and identify the most effective follow-up actions to take.



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Engaging For Performance

Employee engagement has become a major focus for leaders and managers in many organizations, for a good number of reasons.

By drawing out the extra efforts of employees, engagement holds out to organizational leaders the prospect of increasing productivity.

With more and more employees looking for working environments where they can be energized and feel that they are making an impact, many organizations view the creation of high engagement workplaces as key to attracting and retaining talent.

Crucially, and in today's volatile and uncertain world, employee engagement is also a resource for coping with change.

In fast-changing environments, it is becoming increasingly difficult for leaders and managers to specify roles and responsibilities precisely. Given that employees at all levels are likely to be faced with unanticipated and ambiguous problem-solving and decision-making situations more frequently, organizations have to be able to count on employees to take appropriate action based on their understanding of, and alignment with, the organizations's priorities, culture's and values.

Korn Ferry's Engaged Performance Framework is distinctive, however, in emphasizing that while engaging employees is essential, engagement alone is not sufficient to sustain maximum levels of performance over time.

Employee Engagement vs Enablement

To get the most from employees, leaders must also ensure that organizational systems and work environments support personal and organizational effectiveness.

Put simply, leaders need to motivate employees - but also *enable* them to channel their extra efforts productively.

Yet why the distinction between engagement and enablement?

Engagement is the "want to" of work. The question it asks is: are employees committed to the organization, and are they willing to put in extra effort for the good of the organization?

Enablement, by contrast, is the "can do" of work. It asks: are employees' skills and abilities being fully utilized in their roles, and does the organizational environment support them in getting work done?

Our research confirms that employee engagement and employee enablement are distinct outcomes that are each influenced by different factors.

Accordingly, leaders seeking to improve the effectiveness of their teams need to determine whether performance issues are the result of a lack of engagement, a lack of enablement, or both. The actions leaders need to take will differ, depending on the answer.





Normative Benchmarks

Survey results can be difficult to interpret in absolute terms. What represents a “good score” varies depending on what you are asking about.

In most organizations today, for instance, questions related to supervision and teamwork will draw more favorable responses from employees, than questions dealing with communication or compensation. By putting survey results in an appropriate context, normative comparisons permit key strengths and potential areas for improvement to be more accurately identified.

Korn Ferry offers one of the world’s largest databases of opinion information.

Our norms comprise data from over 8 million employees surveyed worldwide.

They allow for comparisons by country/ region, industry, union/ non-union populations, and employee demographics.

We also offer norms that many of our clients use in order to track progress in achieving best-in-class levels.

Flexibly adapting to your needs

Employers should be aware: given the tremendous variability that exists in organizational cultures and survey objectives, a one-size-fits-all approach to employee surveys is bound to fail.

To counter this, our solutions allow for the tailoring of all aspects of the survey process - from questionnaire design to results reporting and action planning - to the particular needs of each client.

Based on our decades of experience working with leading organizations worldwide, we bring strong perspectives regarding the types of solutions that will best meet an organization’s needs. Our approach emphasizes flexibly adapting our tools and capabilities to fit the organizational context (rather than force-fitting a predetermined approach to what may well be unique client circumstances).

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Product services: accessing logistical and consulting support.

While Korn Ferry Listen gives organizations powerful tools for designing and deploying surveys independently, clients also have access to a range of tailored support packages too.

Organizations may find that they require more expert “hands on” project management support or help in managing survey logistics, since doing so can free them up to focus their efforts on using the survey results effectively.

Our consulting support can also include:

- The ability to connect survey processes with business and talent priorities
- Guidance in conducting more advanced analysis
- The design and implementation of impactful change initiatives.



Our Product Suite: achieving integrated perspectives

Korn Ferry Listen resides within a broader suite of solutions that include Success Profiles for thousands of different roles; benchmarking on reward practices and staffing levels; and market insights on topics such as candidate scarcity and turnover trends.

This forms part of a growing trend that sees Korn Ferry increasingly connecting employee feedback to other sources of internal or external data in order to help clients gain deeper insights into organizational performance and achieve more in the way of effective change.

The benefits of a more continuous and integrated approach.

Throughout the previous pages, we have looked at the potential pitfalls of pulse surveys, and at some of the key areas organizations need to focus upon in order to establish an optimum environment for frequent feedback. What we haven't yet fully addressed is the all-important question of why such an environment is desirable or worthwhile.

Let's start with some of the most obvious. When done properly, regular feedback provides:

- Deeper insights into key organizational metrics
- Closer monitoring of business-critical activities
- Advance warning of emerging issues
- Ongoing updates on areas undergoing significant change

If and when employers succeed in combining employee feedback with other data and insights, the benefits become even more pronounced.

At Korn Ferry, we use our decades of research, data, and expertise across the talent spectrum to help our clients connect the dots between employee engagement and all the other critical elements of the talent mix, whether its corporate culture, succession planning, job design, or compensation strategy.

In doing so, we enable organizations to pinpoint any areas where perceptions, policies, and practices are not aligned, and then furnish them with the insights they need to set a better-informed strategy in future.



Conclusion

As technology makes it easier than ever for organizations to create, launch, and manage employee engagement activity, it is inevitable that we should see a move towards a model where feedback is gathered on an almost continuous basis.

More frequent feedback does have many advantages.

It can help ensure that perspectives on the organization and work environments are up-to-date while providing mechanisms for tracking emerging issues before they become a problem.

Likewise, pulse surveys and polls can be used to focus on key groups (business units, job levels, functions) to gain an in-depth understanding and to target responses.

However, before fully embracing next-generation employee engagement tools, organizations would be well advised to make absolutely certain they have the right foundations in place. Getting the most out of frequent feedback requires important shifts in the surrounding culture and in the methods used for managing the data and turning results into actionable insight.

Without these, increased engagement activity could, in fact, become counter-productive, and result in managers and employees becoming disillusioned with the process and feeling that their voices aren't being heard.

With the proper action plan in place, however, frequent feedback can become a powerful tool for optimizing performance, enabling organizations to fully understand employee engagement levels, and providing the ability to compare employee perceptions with internal and external reality. This can lead to rich insights that will in turn, drive better-informed, strategic decisions.



About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We help clients synchronize strategy and talent to drive superior performance. We work with organizations to design their structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people to bring their strategy to life. And we advise them on how to reward, develop, and motivate their people.