E-feedback – the use of electronic methods to collect employee feedback

AUSTRALIAN SURVEY RESEARCH

Introduction

This paper addresses the potential applications of internets and intranets (webs) for collecting feedback from employees. It outlines the major issues involved in employee feedback activities, whether web-enabled or not, and the areas in which webs can add the greatest benefit. The paper also discusses circumstances where web technology may not be so beneficial.

Warning

It's unusual to offer a qualification this early in a paper, but your attention must be drawn to a (misguided) hope many HR practitioners and managers have: that using electronic feedback (e-feedback) activities will improve the quality of feedback processes. In a world of increasingly high tech and low touch, employee feedback still requires the human touch and, the more the touch, the more likely it is that feedback quality will improve. E-feedback CAN provide other benefits to feedback activities such as speed, cost reduction, and increased power of analysis but it will not provide process quality improvement.

From this base, we will explore the world of e-feedback.

Feedback and feedforward

Most of the attention given to using webs in HR activities focuses on getting information out to employees, for example, training course content, policies and procedures, job vacancies, and general mail/bulletin items. These are all feedforward activities and the result is that employees have the latest information faster and cheaper. The same information is available at once to everyone, and it greatly reduces the need for paper and HR staffs' time in answering the phone. For once, both employees and HR staff benefit from this technology.

However, using the technology this way only reinforces the focus of HR functions on administrative activities. It does not necessarily make them more business-focused. But taking away some of the administrative load may free some time for HR staff to undertake more strategic activities which in turn should impact on organizational effectiveness and bottom line results.

Many organizations are implementing some form of electronic yellow pages that provide information to questions such as "how do I find out about this or who can help me with that?" Much less attention has been paid to using webs for feed***back*** activities and this is what this paper focuses on. The term feedback is used in its loosest form to mean any activity where responses, opinions, facts or any combination of these are sought from someone in a structured way. Typical HR feedback activities include:

- recruitment/job applications
- input to plans, eg, business plans, budgets, training plans, change initiatives
- skills audits or competency assessments
- training needs analysis
- pre and post training evaluation
- opinion surveying of any nature, eg, climate survey, internal customer satisfaction, employee attitudes
- performance feedback of any nature, eg, downwards, upwards, team, 360°
- exit interviews

And the above table is not exhaustive. In the past year, it is highly probably that your organization has collected ideas or comments from several groups of people on a wide range of topics – be it HR-related on otherwise. Just think of inputs to business plans, sales proposals, budgets, process improvements/suggestions, evaluation of suppliers – and the list goes on.

When you compare the feedback and feedforward lists, most feedback activities are not primarily administrative in nature but have a much greater business or operational impact. And, most importantly, by combining data that is generated by different feedback activities and combining feedback data with other business indicators such as sales, profits, market share, and external customer satisfaction, extremely powerful and predictive information can be created.

HR practitioners often miss these opportunities for creating powerful information and often this is because feedback data is collected:

- by different people and functions at quite different times in any cycle
- by different means (verbal vs paper vs computer)
- for quite different purposes
- without any understanding of how the data could be integrated with other organizational measure.

So how can the web help?

Feedback steps

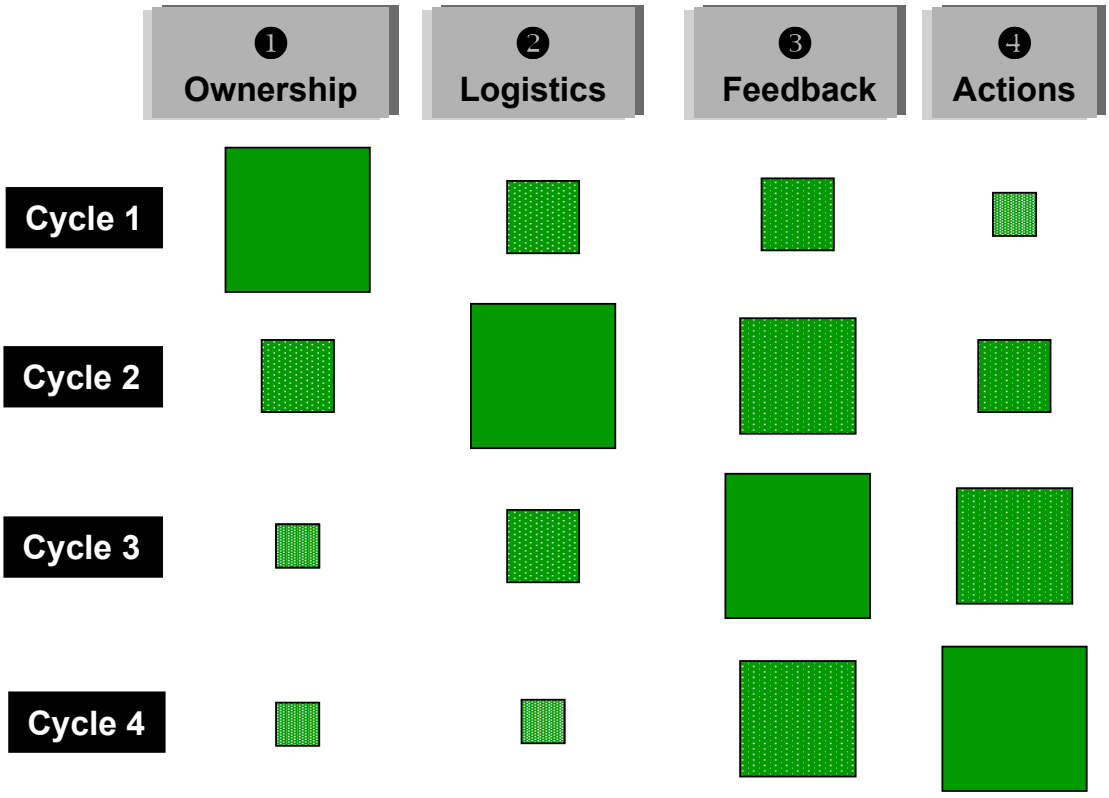
Let's look at the major steps of any feedback activity. Below they have been broken down into large chunks with some examples of the activities that fit into each. When reading the list think of a particular feedback activity such as a whole of workforce employee opinion survey, a new 360° feedback activity or a company-wide skills audit.

❶	The ownership stuff	Getting senior management buy-in, commitment and support
		Getting employee acceptance
❷	Logistics	Activity design, production, briefing/training, distribution, collection, collation, report generation, etc
❸	Discussing results	Explaining and discussing the results, especially between supervisors and employees
❹	Taking appropriate action	Agreeing on what needs to be done then actually doing it, for example, training, changing company policies, recruiting different types of people, rewarding and recognizing employees differently and sharing more and/or different types of information with employees.

E-feedback can **only** help with step 2 - logistics. Hence the warning at the beginning of this paper.

BUT, the first time the HR department runs a new feedback initiative, it is usually on a pilot basis. It requires all the steps with not so much effort on logistics as this is usually handraulic and the pilot is done with a group of employees who are easy to work with. As soon as the activity is run company-wide, it's a very different story. From experience, we know there is an enormous time and effort difference for the HR administrator when doing a 360° survey with 12 people receiving feedback and then going to 300 people. Wait till it goes up to 3,000! And the same applies for an opinion survey of 100 employees compared with 10,000.

So while the first hurdle in a feedback activity is to get ownership by non-HR areas, the second hurdle is to get the HR department to repeat the activity – given their highly likely disastrous experience with previous heavy-effort logistics projects . Employees will usually participate in two cycles of feedback without seeing tangible results or improvements before they boycott the third round. So, HR practitioners, you get two chances to get it right. The focus of effort in conducting feedback activities in each cycle should move through the steps like this:



This means that HR's focus should move progressively from logistics to the quality of feedback and the effectiveness of recommendation and action implementation, that is, where the process can make a difference to organizational performance.

How e-feedback can help with the logistics step

E-feedback can help make this happen by significantly reducing the burden of logistics in the following ways:

- reducing the time it takes to design a survey or feedback form. Good survey tools will have a template function that allows you to cut and paste from previous surveys and to store questions in a library. This type of functionality allows an administrator to slightly vary questionnaires or forms for different target groups, eg, a similar but different performance review form for senior managers, middle managers and operatives.

- removing the need for paper and reproduction – questionnaires, envelopes; photocopying or printing
- removing the need for physical distribution (internal mail, external mail, couriers, etc) and the time this takes. If your intranet is already established, web browsers can present every respondent the same material at the same time. Physical distribution is a particular issue for 360° surveys where "who gets what" is important - where the relationship of the respondent (self, peer, subordinate, etc) can mean that a different questionnaire is distributed. The time taken for physical distribution is also an important consideration for global surveys – or in any situation where organizations have operations in many, quite distant locations.
- removing the need for data entry and/or scanning because as respondents give feedback, they are doing their own data entry. This avoids the error rates inherent in third party data entry or scanning and removes the cost of input data validation/error checking.
- tracking who has and has not responded and the sending of automatic follow-ups (e-mails) to non-respondents. This is a labor-intensive activity in paper–based systems.
- generating feedback reports easily from the database and distributing these electronically to appropriate people. Again, reproduction and distribution costs are eliminated.

Why e-feedback won't help with ownership, feedback and action steps

Using new technology is likely to cause some concerns with senior managers and employees. Senior managers are likely to accept the introduction of web technology into existing feedback processes because it will improve logistical efficiency and lower costs.

Employees will be wary of the technology because of confidentiality/security reasons. However, you can reassure them that e-feedback is at least as secure as existing paper processes. For example, breaking into a database containing feedback information is much harder than picking a lock or looking over someone's shoulder or raiding their files while they are away from their desk.

As discussed in the disclaimer, e-feedback does not affect the content of feedback activities, neither the questions, the answers nor the way that feedback is discussed. It can only get the questions, answers and results to and from people faster and with fewer resources.

E-feedback will not make it in any way easier for managers and employees to take actions on the feedback. Only people, not machines, can make decisions to do things and make changes to their organization and its processes.

The real pot of gold – data mining

Some of the major benefits of e-feedback are in the logistics area--another major source of benefits is in the ability to mine your own data. There are two aspects to data mining that need to be considered: data ownership and data integration. You must first own your data before you can integrate it. Ownership, however, does not mean integration necessarily occurs.

1. Data ownership

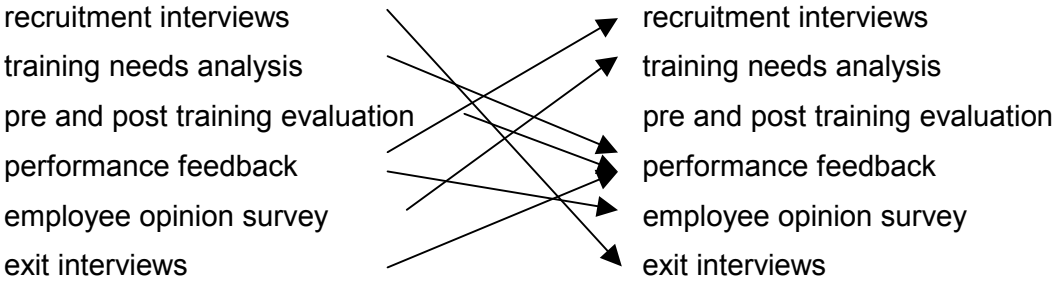
When organizations engage a survey firm to conduct an employee attitude survey or climate audit, it is often not clearly understood that the organization will not get a complete and full copy of their data. Each "cut" of data, eg, how do all job grade 8+ employees rate health and safety or how do the operators from x site compare with y site on teamwork, must be requested from the survey firm and a charge is usually made for this data. For large organizations this can mean big bucks.

For large organizations, surveys may take up to six months to process. The argument for using international surveyors is that they have international databases and benchmarks. However, in medium to large organizations, this international benchmarking data is, in practice, very little used. Of far more use to an organization are its internal benchmarks, that is, which department or division has demonstrated best practice internally and how can this information be shared quickly.

E-feedback technology using LANs, the internet or intranets means that you will own your own data and be able to do what you like with it, when you need it.

2. Data integration

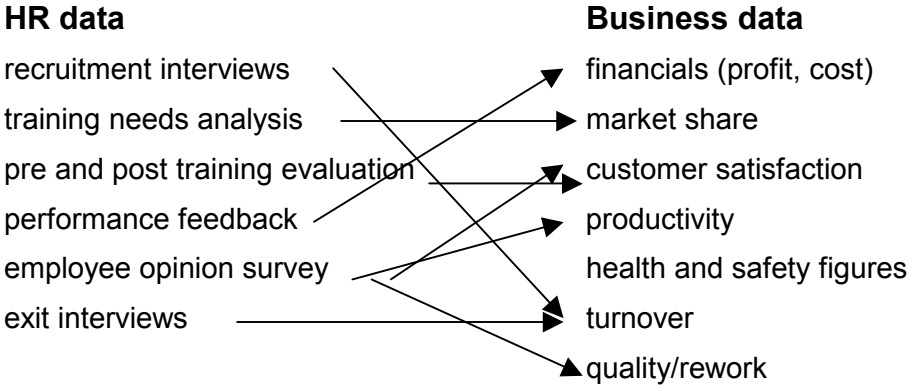
Once you own your own data AND it is in an electronic format, you can analyze it, compare it with other data and generate powerful insights including cause and effect patterns and areas of difference or similarity. It can be mixed and matched to generate deep insights into your workforce and its dynamics. Here are some possible combinations that could produce useful information:



Looking for patterns in these combinations could indicate:

- how you might need to change your recruitment criteria or
- whether your training was making any difference to employee performance or
- whether poor performers are always the most dissatisfied employees, or
- the correlation between 360° feedback and upward feedback housed within the employee opinion survey.

The resulting information can shape HR strategy. However, the real data mining occurs when you combine HR data with business data. Again you can mix and match. If information is stored in databases, longitudinal analysis can be conducted on items such as employee satisfaction, financial results and customer satisfaction. Once patterns and trends are established, is it possible to use employee satisfaction measures as predictors of organizational performance. These types of patterns and trends can be used to shape business strategy.



Technology pros and cons

Below are some comparisons of the different methods that can be used for distributing and collecting feedback. LAN is local area network. Web can be either Intranets or the Internet.

	Method		
Criteria	**Paper**	**LAN**	**Web**
computer literacy required	no	yes	yes
amount of respondent training	none	little	maybe
technology entry cost	low	medium	medium
running costs (reproduction, distribution, etc)	high	low	low
HR administration effort	high	low	low
IT administration effort	none	high	medium
ability to track of respondents' answers	difficult	easy	easy
third party data entry	yes	no	no
speed of distribution	slow	instant	instant
delivery method	manual	only if PC connected	browser
ability to automate analysis	no	yes	yes
longitudinal analysis/data mining	no	yes	yes
common IT platform		problem	browser

Web vs Lotus Notes

Lotus Notes is a hybrid technology which fits between LANs and webs. It combines e-mail, document creation and database storage with a common user interface. It is suitable for all surveys that don't require relationship management such as 360° surveys. Lotus Notes is expensive to introduce and is commonly not made available to all employees in an organization. Where available, it is an excellent tool for most types of surveys. It provides feedback reports which are accessible according to a variety of security access criteria.

However, for those organizations which do not have Lotus Notes, the implementation of an intranet offers more versatility at lower cost.

The scenario where e-feedback works best

- large organizations (more than 2,000 employees)
- geographically spread
- different time zones and/or working patterns
- PC literate employees
- own intranet, or PC's which can access the internet.

However, smaller organizations should not be put off by this, because increasingly e-feedback and access to web browsers will be available on a bureau or outsourcing basis.

Other issues that need to be considered

1. Confidentiality/data security

This issue exists for employee feedback activities, irrespective of the method of collecting data. Employees need to know that their feedback will remain anonymous (in the case of opinion and 360° surveys) or that only certain people will see the data (in performance appraisal situations). In many cases, they, or some of their representatives, need to have tangible proof that confidentiality can be assured. This is easier to demonstrate with paper systems because it is easy to remove an audit and address trail. While it is also just as easy to remove an electronic address trail, employees do not necessarily believe this. Trials, pilot tests, manager support are one of convincing employees. In addition it is beneficial to hold discussions with key employees who can understand the technology and can convince other employees of the confidentiality of their answers. There is no simple solution to this problem except establishing a track record of saying what mean and doing what you say.

In high quality software systems built for feedback collection, data is encrypted and decrypted with database passwords not even accessible to a survey administrator. In addition, and especially for 360° and opinion surveys, the administrator cannot identify individual responses. This can be easily demonstrated to groups of key employees.

It is possible to hack into databases, but the likelihood of this happening is the same as a break-in to the HR manager's or survey firm's offices.

2. Computer literacy and bias

There is no doubt that e-feedback will only suit certain organizations and/or certain types of workforces. Computer literacy is an issue that needs to be addressed if you want all employees to use a common feedback method. However, experience indicates that computer literacy is an issue irrespective of e-feedback. It is a general workplace issue which is increasing in importance. More and more, operative-level employees are required to use computers as part of their jobs.

Of more concern may be literacy levels in general, rather than computer literacy. If computer **access**, rather than literacy, is an issue then offering canteen or kiosk access to the web is a possible solution. Another solution for the computer literacy issue is to offer paper alternatives. But this raises a possible issue of bias between different methods and doesn't remove the general literacy issue.

It must be clearly understood that nearly all organizational research is conducted without validity and reliability studies – unlike psychological research. Because there is little scientific rigor to organizational research, it is also extremely difficult to measure bias. In addition, it is difficult to find research that indicates bias in the type of activities this paper is addressing.

3. Some special considerations

Different types of feedback have unique requirements that affect the type of e-feedback tool used. Here is a brief summary.

Activity	Unique requirement
Employee opinion/climate surveys	• total anonymity/confidentiality • very large database • ability to capture numeric and text responses
360° surveys	• relationship management (keeping track of who is responding about whom); this usually requires a relational database
Performance reviews	• small group (manager, supervisor, employee) access to the same information, ie, different to opinion surveys where no-one else can see what one person says

In summary

The major benefits of web-enabled feedback are:

- reduced time and effort of creating, distributing, answering and analyzing feedback activities.
- reduced costs, especially when large numbers of employees are involved and the technology exists.
- far greater analytical ability, especially data mining
- focus of effort in conducting the feedback activity can be moved from logistics to feedback quality, implementing recommendations and doing deeper analysis.

E-feedback will not:

- be a panacea for improving the quality of face-to-face feedback– there will always be a high touch component to feedback activities, irrespective of the amount of technology used.
- be a suitable solution for workforces that do not use PCs or have access to the web.