Amplifying employee voice

How organizations can better connect to the pulse of the workforce

How IBM can help

Today's human resources organizations need to attract and grow top-performing talent, create engaging social and collaborative cultures, and connect the right people to get work done. IBM solutions combine market-leading talent management and social collaboration tools with the power of workforce science and advanced analytics. We help organizations build impassioned and engaged workforces, and deepen client relationships that can lead to measurable business outcomes.

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Why listen to employees?

To build an engaged workforce, it is more important than ever to understand and act upon employee ideas, needs and concerns. Today, emerging internal and external social platforms make it easier to capture, analyze and reveal potential workforce issues and hidden opportunities. Such activities fit the category of "employee listening." For a mutually beneficial two-way conversation, organizations need to understand how willing employees are to share their views. Then, organizations can move ahead to select tools, inspire participation, build a listening coalition, protect privacy and – most importantly, according to IBM research – follow up with meaningful, appropriate actions.

Executive summary

The rise of social media, coupled with the desire to build more engaged and productive workforces, has brought "active employee listening" to the forefront of management attention. No longer is it enough to encourage employees to speak up about topics that matter to them. Organizations today need to more actively solicit, analyze and engage in ongoing conversations with past, present and even future employees. Having access to the collective "employee voice" can help leaders achieve diverse goals, including identifying innovations, preventing discord and improving productivity, as well as building a better connection to the organization and its mission. So, how can organizations establish and manage mutually beneficial listening programs?

To better understand what companies are doing in the area of employee listening and the extent to which employees are willing to participate, we analyzed data from the 2015 IBM Smarter Workforce Institute WorkTrends Survey – a broad-based survey of over 24,000 employees from 23 countries, a cross-section of industries and job functions, and thousands of companies. We also conducted interviews with 12 organizations that have improved their listening capabilities and from emerging vendors in this space.

Overall, we found most employees want to share their voices, regardless of how the organization listens, and feel supported in doing so. Employees see the advantages of listening programs for themselves and their organizations, but also recognize the disadvantages of potential cynicism, conflict and excessive use of resources.

83% of surveyed employees said they would **participate in an employee listening program**

Only 62% of Baby Boomers surveyed believe **management will act on their input**, compared to 78% of Millennials

HR practitioners who use **multiple listening methods** rated their organizational performance and reputation 24% higher than those who do not

Not only do listening programs help employees feel more engaged, our research shows that these programs are associated with positive business results. Organizations using multiple listening methods reported higher ratings for organizational performance and reputation.

By embracing employees' willingness to engage, organizations can work more effectively with an increasingly vocal and dispersed workforce. They can also gain valuable insights – from spotting warning signs to garnering innovative ideas – based on information employees share every day. Organizations can then turn those insights into action to improve organizational knowledge, productivity and performance, and to deepen employee engagement.

What is driving interest in employee listening?

Our discussions with organizations identified three imperatives and three enablers that help explain organizations' increasing attention to employee listening (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Employee listening is more necessary and more feasible than in the past

Imperatives

Embrace the new consumer mindset
- Share opinions publicly
- Expect transparency
- Demand responsiveness

Move beyond engagement to insight
- Replace scoring with dialogue
- Understand the employee experience
- Strengthen link to organizational outcomes

Reveal the unsaid and unseen
- Better understand the workforce supply chain lifecycle
- Improve access to employee skills and insights
- Involve employees as "consumer testers"

Employee listening

Enablers

New data collection capabilities
- Unstructured data mining tools
- Non-intrusive technology
- Ubiquitous polling and survey tools

More powerful analytics capabilities
- Automated analysis of unstructured data
- Combined use of structured and unstructured data
- Fast, real-time handling of volumes of data

Better communications capabilities
- Faster delivery of results
- Easier understanding of and ability to act on findings
- Improved visualization tools

Source: IBM Institute for Business Value and IBM Smarter Workforce Institute analysis.

Imperatives

Organizations are compelled to actively engage today's employees through listening programs for several reasons.

Embrace the new consumer mindset

Nearly all consumer brands on the web actively solicit feedback on almost every aspect of the customer experience – from co-designing product features to providing community-based customer support. With social media, individuals want more than an opportunity to vent. They also want answers. Why were their favorite flavors discontinued, why were their flights delayed and when will the potholes on their streets be filled?

Understandably, individuals also want similar conversations within the workplace. Established third-party sites such as Glassdoor and the Vault, as well as new entrants such as Memo, give employees the opportunity to rate their work experiences and share opinions about their employers. Internal social platforms that have entered the mainstream of corporations and government agencies also provide forums to raise issues that previously would have been left at the water cooler.

Whether expressing brilliant insights, legitimate observations or disgruntled rantings, employees expect that their voices will be heard and addressed with the same frequency, depth and speed they receive as customers outside of work.

Move beyond engagement to insight

Engagement has replaced satisfaction as a watchword for organizations looking to attract and retain talent. Multiple rigorous research studies have made clear linkages between employee engagement and organizational performance.[1] Prior IBM research has shown a correlation between greater investment in employee engagement and significantly higher levels of customer satisfaction, shareholder earnings and return on assets.[2] However, much like satisfaction, engagement has – for many companies – become little more than a score used to benchmark progress over time and against other organizations.

True employee engagement involves an understanding of the complete employee experience. It requires a comprehension of how employees feel, both physically and emotionally, in their work environments. It also involves an understanding of the complex relationship between employees, managers and the larger organization. And this cannot always be gauged through yearly surveys alone.

Reveal the unsaid and unseen

Much like consumers commenting on their experiences with products and services, employees can provide unique insights into opportunities for improvement within their organizations. They meet with customers and business partners, encounter competitors and may be first to see new entrants into the marketplace. So, organizations are recognizing the importance of employees as a channel for new breakthroughs and continuous improvement.

For several years, we have seen companies use various approaches to tap into the knowledge and experience of their employees.[3] While most of these approaches have actively solicited employee input, they can now be combined with other, more passive mining of data sources – from social network postings to metadata about page views on the intranet – to help identify emerging trends, employee concerns and potential influence leaders.

Enablers

As these imperatives cause organizations to pay closer attention to what employees are saying, technology is enabling organizations to more effectively capture, analyze and respond to employee ideas, comments and concerns.

New data collection capabilities

Organizations can obtain text and other forms of unstructured data from internal and external sources. Traditional survey tools have gotten easier to administer and tailor for use on mobile devices. Wearable devices, such as "sociometers," can passively capture information about employee interactions – location, length of interaction, vital signals and even conversation volume – without direct user involvement.

More powerful analytic capabilities

Data can be analyzed with greater speed and accuracy than before. Today's analysis tools can apply cognitive computing principles to identify issues such as employee mood and sentiment, and then integrate these findings with more traditional sources of human capital data, such as performance metrics and retention statistics.

Better methods to communicate insights

Improved visualization tools enable organizations to deliver faster, easier-to-understand results from their listening efforts. For example, mini-polling survey tools can provide respondents with real-time graphs showing how their responses compare to others. Additional visualization tools help individuals make better sense of network data and complex analyses.

Listening from the employee perspective

Organizations have clear reasons to build their listening capabilities, but first they need something to hear. An important consideration of any listening program is whether employees will participate.

In the 2015 WorkTrends survey, respondents were asked to imagine they were employees of a company implementing a new initiative to listen to employee opinions and feedback. Respondents were randomly assigned to some combination of four listening approaches: census surveys, sample surveys, mini-polls and social analytics (see sidebar, "Listening approaches analyzed in the WorkTrends survey").

Employee responses were measured on three dimensions:

Voice – Willingness to make recommendations and communicate opinions

Support – Belief that their organizations care about and value them

Action – Confidence that positive change would result.

In the survey, we also asked respondents open-ended questions to describe the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

Employees are willing to share
Overall, a clear majority of employees are willing to share, feel supported and believe positive action will result from listening (see Figure 2). Eighty-three percent of those surveyed want to share information, regardless of how the organization listens. Although the use of internal social analytics alone leads to less willingness to share, the effect is small and can be compensated for by adding a census survey or mini-poll.

Listening approaches analyzed in the WorkTrends survey

Census surveys – Large-scale opinion surveys of all employees, every one or two years

Sample surveys – Short, frequent surveys covering specific topics for a sub-selection of employees

Mini-polls – Frequent, single-question surveys of all employees, sometimes followed by a data visualization

Social analytics – Analysis of employee content published on internal social networks

While many employees were willing to contribute to listening programs, some remained unsure that change would occur as a result.

Figure 2

Most employees are willing to speak up, feel supported and believe action will result

Percent who agree and strongly agree

- ■ Census survey ■ Sample survey ■ Mini-poll ■ Internal social analytics
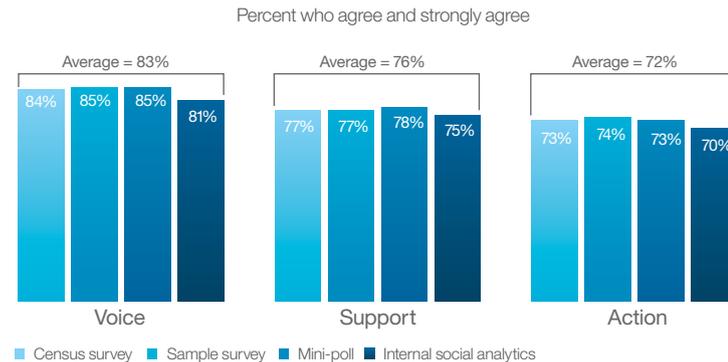
Source: 2015 IBM Smarter Workforce Institute WorkTrends Survey, n=4,357.

Seventy-six percent of respondents agreed that they would feel supported by their organization if listened to in these ways. While a clear majority of respondents were positive about all three dimensions, they were least optimistic about the organization taking action, with 72 percent of respondents expressing confidence that positive change would result.

Benefits and risks of listening

Employees see advantages for themselves, including having the opportunity to express their opinions and ideas, and for their organizations, such as gaining insights, making improvements and increasing productivity. Advantages of census surveys, sample surveys and mini-polls fall along a continuum from a wider range and variety of feedback to more regular and immediate feedback. Internal social analytics stand alone, with more employees seeing honest, open and real feedback as an advantage.
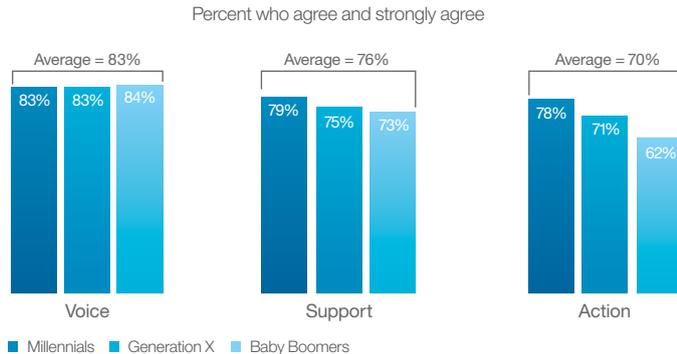
Disadvantages fall into three broad categories: cynicism, conflict and excessive use of resources (see sidebar, "Employee-perceived disadvantages to listening fall into three categories"). Resource use is more likely to be seen as a disadvantage of census surveys, sample surveys and mini-polls, whereas conflict is more likely to be seen as a disadvantage of internal social analytics, particularly the potential for privacy violations.[4]

Subtle demographic variations affect listening

Some subtle distinctions exist in how employees across different demographic groups perceive listening programs. Overall, we found generations to be more alike than different. Millennials are just as willing to express voice as Gen Xers and Baby Boomers. Yet, Baby Boomers are less confident that management will act based on their input (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

All generations are willing to voice. Boomers are less confident that actions will result.

Percent who agree and strongly agree

- Millennials ■ Generation X ■ Baby Boomers

Source: 2015 IBM Smarter Workforce Institute WorkTrends Survey, n=16,212.

Employee-perceived disadvantages to listening fall into three categories

Cynicism
"It's fairly easy for employers to ignore results."
"Employees will not be truthful."

Conflict
"Management could retaliate."
"It could be seen as intrusive."

Excessive use of resources
"Employees will get bored."
"It's a big waste of time."

In some countries, employees are less positive about both voice and action. In others, employees are willing to voice but expect less action. These differences can impact global rollouts of listening efforts.

From a global perspective, employees in higher-growth countries are more positive about expressing their voices and in their expectations for action (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Higher-growth countries tend to be more optimistic about employee listening
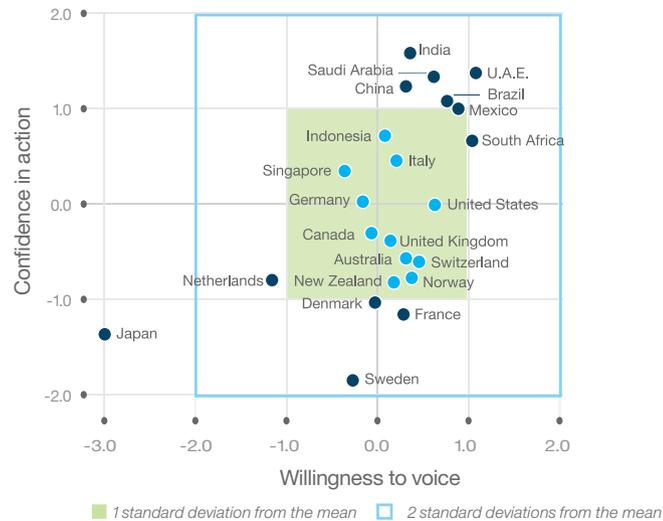
Note: Scores have been standardized, mean is 0 and standard deviation is 1.
Source: 2015 IBM Smarter Workforce Institute WorkTrends Survey, n=16,212.

Workplace location also matters. Remote workers are just as willing to voice as in-house employees and are more willing to voice when internal social analytics are used. In fact, organizations are increasingly using social listening tools to listen to widely dispersed workforces.[5]

Listening from the organizational perspective

In addition to census surveys, sample surveys, mini-polls and internal social analytics, our follow-up interviews unearthed other important sources of employee voice. All of the sources can be organized in three tiers of listening approaches, each including both structured and unstructured data sources: Tried-and-true, Mining for insight and The next frontier (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Sources of employee voice can be categorized in three tiers
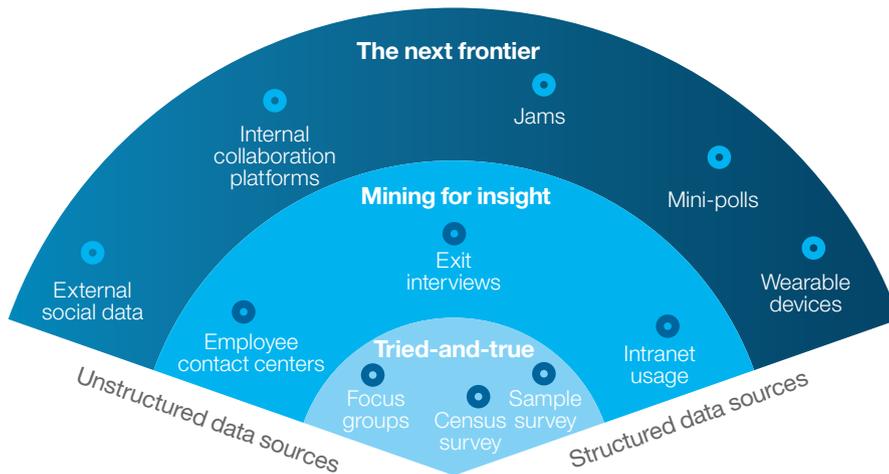
Source: IBM Institute for Business Value and IBM Smarter Workforce Institute analysis.

Tried-and-true

Tried-and-true data sources include traditional methods of employee listening, such as focus groups, census surveys and sample surveys. Census and sample surveys primarily gather structured data, but may also allow employees to add suggestions and comments. Focus groups are at the opposite end of the spectrum: the data gathered are almost wholly based on unstructured conversation among a group of employees, although the questions guiding the conversation are often structured (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Strengths and weaknesses of traditional sources of employee voice

Source	Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
Focus groups	Group interview to solve problems or elicit ideas	• Allows direct employee access to leadership when groups span the organizational hierarchy • Enables emergent issues to surface through the exchange of ideas	• Some employees may be hesitant to offer opinions in a group setting • Requires a skilled facilitator – particularly for sensitive subjects • Can be labor-intensive and time-consuming
Census survey	Survey of all employees every one or two years	• Can be comprehensive in scope and employee reach • Is a preferred tool for benchmarking • Data can be reported for all levels of management	• Requires time to design, administer and analyze • May not surface emergent issues
Sample survey	Periodic survey of a representative sample covering specific topics	• Can obtain responses to targeted questions more frequently • Provides comparable information to a census survey with fewer participants	• Limits reporting to higher levels of aggregation within the organization • May not surface emergent issues

Source: IBM Institute for Business Value and IBM Smarter Workforce Institute analysis.

Mining for insight

Approaches in this tier utilize data that exist within organizations, but historically have not been used as a source for employee listening. Types of data range from highly structured, such as intranet usage statistics, to highly unstructured, such as employee contact center data (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Using untapped sources of employee voice within organizations

Source	Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
Employee contact center	Call recordings, web chats and accessed frequently-asked-questions data	• Provides insights into confusing policies or operational issues • Identifies sources of employee stress or anxiety	• May generate insufficient data for analysis • Doesn't provide a comprehensive view of issues and concerns
Exit interviews	Input from individuals who are leaving the organization	• Can reveal employee attrition trends • May promote candid insights, particularly if conducted anonymously and confidentially by third party	• Is not representative of the organization and may only highlight grievances • Employees may be reluctant to share candid feedback due to reputation concerns
Intranet usage	Views, clicks, duration of visits and other usage patterns	• Reveals trends in subject matter interest • Identifies influencers and information-sharing patterns	• Can lead to false insights since data lack context

Source: IBM Institute for Business Value and IBM Smarter Workforce Institute analysis.

The next frontier

This tier explores emergent sources of data for employee listening, including mini-polls, jams, internal collaboration platforms, wearable devices and external social data (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Emergent data sources for employee listening

Source	Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
External social data	Data from public social media sites	• May uncover potential brand and reputation issues • Can provide more honest feedback and insight into the feelings behind the words	• Requires policies for ethical data mining and use • Not representative of the entire workforce
Internal collaboration platforms	Online tools for sharing information and raising internal visibility	• Can help identify employee sentiment trends and issues • Highlight informal communications networks	• Not all employees will be comfortable with public forum • Organization may not have collaboration platforms that enough employees consistently use
Jams and other collaborative events	Online, facilitated events focused on a specific topic	• Allow employees to engage with others across the organization • Enable employees to build off each other's ideas	• Resources required to plan and administer, as well as employee participation time • Not all employees will be comfortable with public forum
Mini-polls	Frequent surveys consisting of a single question	• Can help companies quickly confirm employee understanding of a topic • Provide immediate feedback to the participants	• Single-item measures can sacrifice reliability, and provide limited information and insights
Wearable devices	Personal devices that track individual activity	• Can capture data without employee effort or lost work time • Capture real-life activity data	• Potential privacy, security and accessibility concerns

Source: IBM Institute for Business Value and IBM Smarter Workforce Institute analysis.

Recommendations: Designing an employee listening program

Inspire audience participation. Explaining the objectives and expected program benefits to employees can inspire participation. The FORT (Feedback, Opt-in, Reciprocal, Transparent) framework could be used as a starting point.[6] FORT identifies four critical practices to encourage employee participation:

- *Feedback.* Track and share progress against the objectives of listening programs.
- *Opt-in.* Select employee data for analysis that has been provided voluntarily.
- *Reciprocal.* Highlight benefits to employees of sharing data.
- *Transparent.* Communicate listening program objectives, and create trust by sharing findings and clearly linking resulting actions to what is learned.

Match your objectives with data sources. Emerging tools and data sources allow for more nuanced objectives, such as problem solving or collaboratively creating new products and services. Some methods are better for exploring a topic, while others are more useful for confirming information. The objective of the listening program will determine how many participants to involve, and which data sources are most appropriate. This, in turn, will determine platform considerations around scalability, availability of data and hosting approaches.

Build a listening coalition across the enterprise. For practical reasons, listening efforts require resources from multiple functions. Building a coalition of stakeholders to design, implement and share information throughout the organization will tap into unique expertise across the enterprise (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

Key stakeholders in an employee listening program

- Develop listening framework, program structure, oversight and analytics
- Link findings to existing workforce effectiveness efforts

- Provide support for listening applications
- Scan for emerging trends

Human resources

Information technology

- Provide guidance on privacy and data management issues
- Address employee concerns

Legal

Employee listening

Corporate commun- ications

- Monitor existing employee sites for insights
- Provide guidance for responses to listening activities

- Encourage and model participation efforts
- Incorporate findings in ongoing improvement plans

Line management

Marketing

- Share external customer listening tools and approaches
- Work with HR on branding related to external candidates

Source: IBM Institute for Business Value and IBM Smarter Workforce Institute analysis.

Pay attention to privacy. Organizations need to consider the level of anonymity/privacy based on the goals and objectives of the listening program, as well as the culture of the organization. Four privacy approaches are: full anonymity, validated anonymity, confidential and identified (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

Different levels of employee privacy

Source	Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
Full anonymity	Company does not know who respondent is	Elicits more truthful responses	Inappropriate comments might be expressed due to lack of accountability
Validated anonymity	Third party validates respondents are who they claim to be	Ensures target population is correct	Inappropriate comments might be expressed due to lack of accountability
Confidential	Company knows who respondent is, but does not reveal the identity	Protects respondents from retaliation	Employees may not trust that responses will remain confidential
Identified	Respondent known publicly	Elicits more careful responses from employees, often leading to actionable feedback	May limit participation and candor

Source: IBM Institute for Business Value and IBM Smarter Workforce Institute analysis.

Make actions speak louder than words. Study participants were unanimous in identifying *the need for action* as the most important element of a listening program. Clearly, it would not be practical or even desirable to act upon every recommendation made by every employee. But respondents were emphatic that organizations demonstrate that insights from their listening programs be acted upon, and that the collected input could be used to influence future decision making. Without this level of responsiveness, employees will be less likely to participate, viewing employee listening as a drain on their time rather than a potential benefit.

Methodology: How we conducted our research

Analyses presented in this report are based on a sample of over 24,000 workers from the WorkTrends survey, administered by the IBM Smarter Workforce Institute in 2015 to workers in 23 countries, in a cross-section of industries, thousands of different organizations and all major job families. Subsample sizes vary depending on analysis.

Additionally, we conducted interviews with 12 subject matter experts and organizations with leading practices in employee listening. Industries included retail, media, social networking, employee engagement vendors and professional services.

Are you ready to respond to employee voices?

- To what extent has your organization established a listening strategy that incorporates different data sources and approaches that align with the program's objectives?

- How is your organization perceived by past, present and future employees?

- How long does it take for your organization to identify and take action on emerging workforce issues?

- How effective is your organization in acting upon what it hears from employees? How can you best let employees know about such actions?

- Which elements of your organizational culture foster – and which hinder – the ability to effectively listen to employees?

Authors

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For more information

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IBM Smarter Workforce Institute

The IBM Smarter Workforce Institute produces rigorous, global, innovative research spanning a wide range of workforce topics to advance the collective understanding of work and organizations.

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