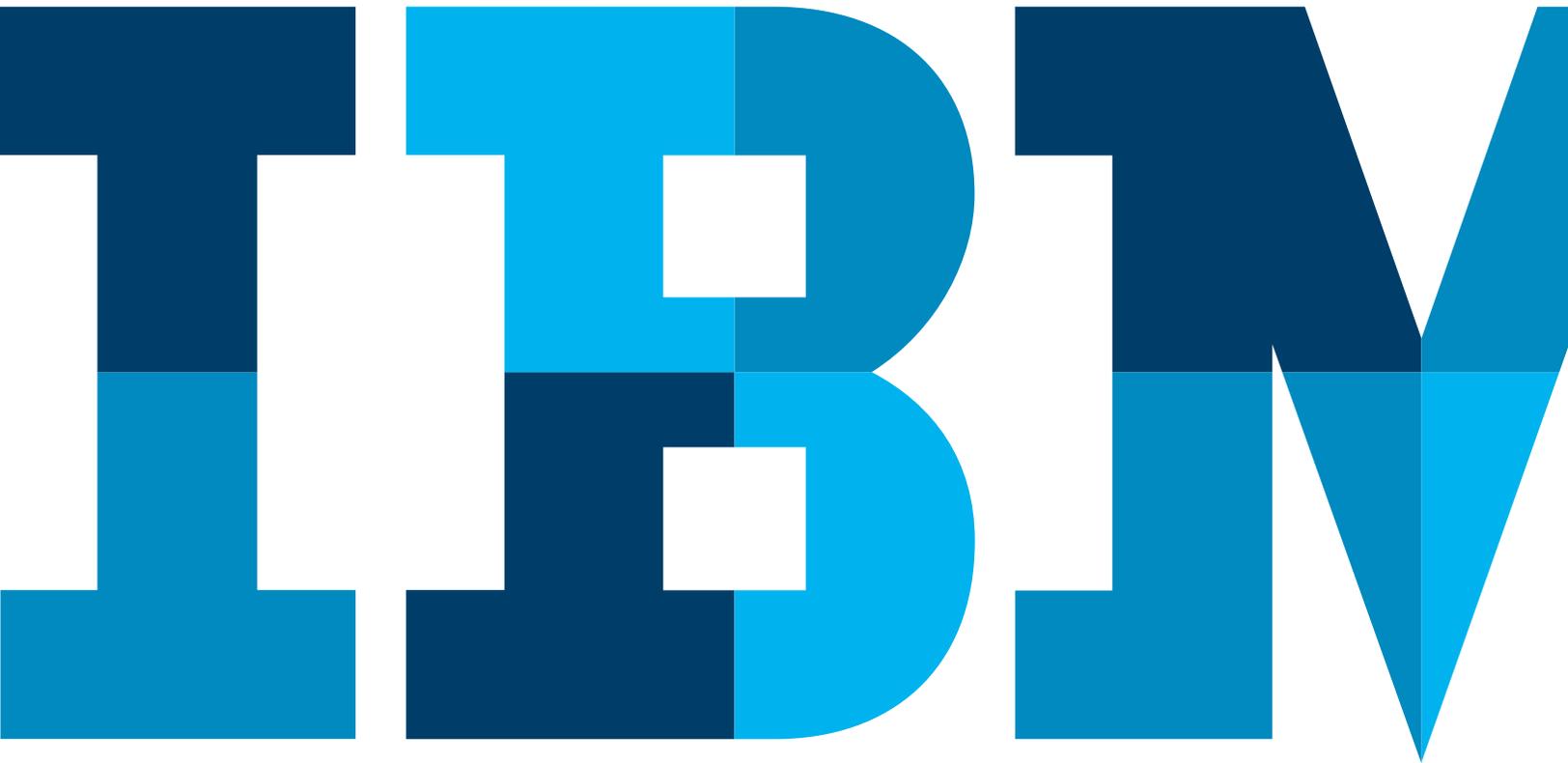# Employee feedback — the Swiss Knife approach

By Benoit Hardy-Vallée, Ph.D, IBM SmarterWorkforce

The world of employee survey and employee engagement is about to radically change, and like many times in our history, IBM is leading the charge. We are taking a "Swiss Knife" approach to employee surveys, developing a new platform that houses various survey tools, all stowed within a single "handle" or location.

IBM Kenexa is about to release a new set of capabilities built on 30 years of Research & Development in the areas of workforce science, talent analytics, and human capital management technology. The forthcoming Employee Voice platform will transform how organizations capture and manage employee feedback, providing integrated design and versatility. At the core of this revolution are unique features to help organizations be more agile, transparent, and responsive to the need of their employees.

Agility, transparency, and responsiveness are not a "nice to have", but rather an contemporary expectation. Today's employees are used to a customer-centric world in their private lives; ratings and online reviews force consumer brands to adjust to customer needs. Corporations are influenced by social media, a connected network in which ideas and opinions spread rapidly.

Social communication is also an increasingly important factor within the workplace. The "command-and-control" leadership approach does not resonate with today's workforce; it is being replaced by an environment in which leaders are expected to inspire and listen. So if one party needs to talk and the other needs to listen, then a mechanism is needed to encourage rich interaction between both. Internal social networks provide one such avenue; however, this type of communication is not anonymous and typically not structured.

Can today's business needs be addressed with a single mechanism? A single system that collects and integrates anonymous and structured data such as traditional surveys and also dynamic data and agile responses similar to social media? The answer is yes; this is what IBM Kenexa is building. This is the Employee Voice survey platform.

The new IBM system will give organizations the ability to self-administer employee surveys that vary in complexity, depending on need. This system offers:

- **Agile survey design.** You can choose the topic, the number of questions, the frequency of survey, and the specific population to survey.
- **Analytics capabilities.** Advanced analytics for data exploration are built into the system. Cognitive computing systems help users discover new insights based on collected data.
- **Online reporting.** User-friendly online reporting recommends next steps and best actions for managers.

And this new system — the Employee Voice platform — offers much more. It is designed specifically to empower HR departments and any stakeholder who needs employee feedback to better manage their business. But more importantly — and beyond the technology itself — it represents a new approach to employee listening. A new approach does not mean the traditional approach no longer has value. The two approaches complement each other. Remember that microwave ovens did not replace traditional ovens — they simply serve a different purpose.

The new IBM approach can be characterized by three important shifts:

1) From research to feedback
Beyond the simple semantics, there is a distinction in these two concepts.

- Research involves a deep understanding of workplace reality, drivers of engagement, performance enablers, manager / leaders effectiveness, and culture.
- Gathering feedback means that you want to know what employees think in order to orient action. It is not so much a way to find the root cause and primary factors that explain your culture (although there is a value for those), but rather a way to do a quick Q&A with your employees and to measure engagement in a more continuous fashion.

2) From attitudes to situations

The traditional employee survey focused largely on employee attitudes: their belief and desires about the organization. *Are they proud? Do they feel like they can grow? Do they have enough recognition? Is communication open? Are leaders trustworthy? Is the future vision motivating? Do they feel part of something bigger?* All these attitudes matter, and years of data show they are the most important predictors of engagement, retention, well-being and productivity.

These attitudes do not change very much every month. There might be a trend, and if things improve, maybe next year an employee will feel more enthusiastic about the future vision. But measuring employee attitude every week or month will not be that useful—it takes time to change it. This is similar to measuring values; they are likely to stay the same throughout a person's professional career. However, contrast attitude and values with a person's mood—that might change many times every day.

Beliefs and desires are an interesting middle-ground. They can change, but not in a snap. You can probably think of a movie, a book, or even a particular food that you did not like the first time, and yet, you "learned to like it" over time. That change did not happen rapidly. Similarly, your beliefs are organized as a complex system of checks and balances that must make sense globally. For example: as an employee, you might doubt that your company is successful, but a recent speech by the CEO convinces you a new direction will help the company become more competitive. As a result, you might start to change your mind. That single event may not be enough to make the vision motivating for that employee personally; however, add a few more events like that over time, and maybe in a year, the employee's perception will have evolved.

Situations are different from attitudes. A situation is something that you observe, and thus what you report is your perception of work place factors rather than how you feel about them. Instead of asking if you find the vision motivating, the question is now whether a leader in your division provided you with an update on the strategy. The focus has shifted. Instead of being asked about something that changes very slowly (for example: vision and motivation), the question now centers on a situation that can be different from month to month. Instead of asking about a mental state that is not observable, the focus has shifted to an observable behaviour.

Situations are also anchored in time and space.

Attitude	Situational	Anchor
Your belief in communication in general	Has your manager shared with you the current plan for the department?	"current"
Your belief that people at your company are recognized appropriately	Have you been recognized in the last month?	"in the last month"
Your belief that you have a promising future in a company	Were you considered for advancement the last time there was an opportunity?	"the last time"

Here are other questions leaders could learn from their workforce:

- Are our employees happy today? How does this compare to last week, last month?
- What one thing, more than anything else do our employees feel will stimulate growth in our business?
- Which Regions are trending up in Engagement this month?
- How are our employees reacting to the strategic announcement we made yesterday?

Again, this does not mean that we must eliminate questions about attitude. After all, we need to know if attitudes about different workforce factors are overall positive or negative. But to shorten the path between a question and an action, a situational question is more conducive to action.

3) From the Single Version of the Truth (SVOTT) to contextual findings

It is now common across organizations that measure engagement to talk about how many employees are engaged, and to track this number year over year. This means that we have a SVOTT: X% are engaged, Y% think that communication is open, etc.

However, change comes in many ways: new hires, lay-offs, resignations, re-assignment, promotions, lateral moves, temporary leaves, retirement, new team/projects/department/ units, merger and acquisitions. Such changes can mean that suddenly your org chart is not up to date. And if the org chart changes — if people are suddenly in a different department, reporting to different people, if the demographics have changed — it might not be productive to look for a SVOTT.

If an organization is able to capture the exact make-up of its hierarchy in real time, in theory, the results of a survey on Monday can differ from the results of a survey on Tuesday. In theory, reporting on Wednesday can differ from reporting on Thursday. The complexity and dynamic nature of the organization determines which information is needed to orient action at the time it is requested. *Do you need a map of engagement across all of your call centers? An understanding of how field operations feel supported by corporate functions? An idea of how the new performance management framework is perceived by second-line managers? How individual contributors of less than 6 months feel about their future?*

The answer to such questions will vary depending on when the question is asked. And that is not a problem, because we are not pursuing an absolute truth, but rather a clear path to act. If the day after a new compensation framework rollout, a division shows as disengaged or dissatisfied, that is an important insight that triggers immediate action: "Let's see what's going on there."

It is important to state that these shifts do not mean that the traditional, once-a-year, organization-wide survey will disappear. Just like microwaves have not eliminated traditional ovens but rather complement them, continuous listening will complement the traditional survey. There is a value in having a research perspective, a SVOTT and a measure of employee attitudes. But using only this medium is limiting. As organizations become more transparent, open, and agile, there is a need for easily capturing employee feedback on specific items when required without initiating the complex machinery of a full employee census.

Employee Voice is a "Swiss Knife" approach to employee listening: various tools can be used for different purposes, and they can all be found in the same place.

About the Author

As an Executive Advisor, Benoit Hardy-Vallée helps IBM clients to create 21st century organizations. Benoit consults with HR leaders to bring innovative practices, evidence-based techniques and workforce analytics in the workplace. As the practice lead and thought leader for IBM Smarter Workforce & Social Business Canada and Caribbean, he develop strategies for talent management, collaboration, leadership development, performance management and employee engagement that makes use of the best technology, science and analytics.

He is also an interdisciplinary scholar who edited books, published research articles and organized conferences that helped systematize the current knowledge on human decision — making across various disciplines (philosophy, psychology, economics, neuroscience, biology). He studied in Montreal, Paris, Waterloo and Toronto. He obtained his Ph.D in Philosophy and cognitive science from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Science Sociales in Paris. In his Ph.D thesis and post-doctoral research, he studied how brains, minds and groups make economic decisions.

You can follow Benoit at on Twitter (@bhv) or on LinkedIn, contact him by email at Benoit.Hardy-Vallee@ca.ibm.com, or visit him at www.hardyvallee.net

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