Do surveys encourage unproductive thinking?

It's not surprising that most people feel a wave of boredom wash over them when they hear the term 'employee engagement survey', particularly because many organisations are now requiring employees to answer the same questions on a frequent basis, sometimes more than once per year. These surveys seek to provide senior management with an insight into how their workforce is feeling about their experiences at work. While the critical importance of this is not disputed, when we consider new insights about the way in which humans process information, should we be asking whether engagement surveys are actually misrepresenting the true voice of the crowd?

The Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman in his award-winning book, Thinking Fast and Slow, summarises his research on the two modes of thinking—System 1 and System 2. These two modes, he argues, dominates the way we interact with the world. The brain uses System 1 thinking to make fast and automatic decisions, and although this system is perfect in specific situations, its rapidness makes it prone to less than optimal decisions and cognitive biases (illogical judgements that the thinker is not consciously aware of). System 2 on the other hand is slow and requires the thinker to give some mental effort to their thought processes. This makes System 2 thinking more resilient to cognitive biases and leads to an increase in insightful interpretations of a given situation.

So, what does this then mean for employee engagement surveys? Organisations use employee surveys to gain an insight into their workforce, but does the nature of likert scales and tick boxes encourage System 1 thinking? Psychological research has shown that this rapid, yet erroneous, System 1 kicks in when the thinker is presented with easy options that do not encourage critical or deliberative thinking. In the case of surveys, what could be easier than just mindlessly ticking a box? If organisations want to get their people to provide considered and insightful information, a new method that encourages effortful and deliberative thought is needed, a method that allows for the personal insight that is achieved from qualitative approaches, while not losing the ability to collect metrics for statistical comparisons. This is where social and digital technologies, mechanisms for making

collective decisions and advanced text analysis, are making a huge difference.

In a recent collaboration with Booking.com, a world leader in holiday accommodation, The Garden social media platform was used as an alternative to an employee survey to identify how Booking.com's people felt about their current development opportunities and how it could be improved. 400 employees took part in the dynamic discussion, where they were given the opportunity to rate fellow colleagues' opinions alongside voicing their own through a qualitative response. Unlike common surveys that are restrictive in individual expression, text and sentiment analysis was used to uncover the themes and emotions that employees discussed. By empowering their people to use System 2 thinking in their feedback, Booking.com have begun to redesign their people development programme so that it is structured around what the crowd wanted.

It's evident now that external social media networks influence how we form and voice our opinions. Social media activates System 2 thinking as it provides a platform for people to construct and voice an opinion that is significant to them. As the comments posted on social media networks are displayed in an open forum, people are more likely to use System 2 thinking because they know that their comments are going to be read and evaluated. This elicits a positive form of social pressure and interaction, which makes the experience not only more enjoyable but also increases repeat participation. Organisations don't need to worry about losing quantitative data, as internal social media networks can be used to numerically reveal sentiment, the relationships people hold, and the personality traits and attitudes of their people.

By implementing an internal social media network in your organisation, you can obtain the holistic employee opinion that you've longed for simply because people are empowered to use their System 2 thinking. Organisations using more collaborative and engaging methods to communicate with their people, will benefit from being able to harness the true voice of their people.