

HR TECH

CLEAR LINE OF SIGHT

Can we ever be truly objective in employee research? Michael Silverman thinks we can with lessons from the consumer research industry.



When you think about employee research, what comes to mind? A monotonous exercise? Twenty minutes of your time once a year spent filling out a series of tick box questions? Or is it more complex than that?

Perhaps you are provided with space to respond to an open-ended question, or a follow up discussion group. You may even have an employee forum or platform to express your views.

While there are now many number of ways to carry out employee research, one question still looms: how is this information being analysed and are the results actually reliable?

Qualitative data gathered through open-ended questions, employee forums and discussion groups (to name a few ways) can offer a deeper insight into areas commonly targeted in generic annual employee surveys. This is a positive step for employee research in trying to glean good quality, actionable insights that can be utilised effectively.

However, like all research methods, there are limitations as these tools can be subjectively analysed and interpreted. Discussion group conversations and answers to open-ended questions that are transcribed could potentially be prone to human error. Likewise, respondents in employee forums might be influenced by extreme views.

At a higher level, subjectivity in analysis could also be present at the reporting stage of employee research. For example, a practitioner might hand pick a few comments out of thousands to demonstrate a particular issue or result. Once again, this is a subjective decision taken on behalf of an organisation - how can we know this is the best possible consensus comment?

“Text analysis is slowly revealing itself to be a hugely valuable tool in employee research.”

It is here where we can learn lessons from the dynamic area of customer and consumer research. For years this industry has been implementing tools to conduct mass market research via social media platforms. While some forward thinking organisations are already using similar approaches, it presents an interesting turning point in employee research for many HR departments.

Text analysis is at the forefront of developments in objective data analysis. Used in consumer research to identify what core themes customers are discussing, brands can analyse mass conversations and detect issues, criticisms and recommendations. Text analysis is slowly revealing itself to be a hugely valuable tool in employee research too.

These advances in technology are giving organisations the ability to take employees' feedback, deconstruct it to a concept level, and understand not just the content and context of a sentence but even relationships between the words. What's more, data can be sliced and diced and linked back to metrics of interest or specific business units.

For large global organisations this offers an efficient way to gauge the feeling of their workforce and drill deeper into problem areas. Not only this, the potential danger of human bias and error previously discussed is minimised.

It doesn't stop there.

Technology can take objectivity one-step further with the addition of sentiment analysis. Consumer research benefits hugely from being able to identify the polarity of customer's feedback; are reviews being positive or negative?



Here, however, is where objective methods of analysis in employee research begin to falter because sentiment can sometimes become lost in the breadth and complexity of feedback. Free text from employees feeding back to organisations is intrinsically different to a customer/consumer feedback as it is likely to be more complex or potentially very negative.

Take a hotel review, for example. Consumer text analysis would be able to identify key themes being discussed i.e. the service, the staff, the price... and sentiment analysis would be able to analyse whether these themes were being discussed negatively or positively.

An employee's work experience on the other hand goes far beyond a review of a two-night stay in a hotel. The multifaceted and personal experience of work is likely to result in feedback that is just that - multifaceted, complicated and individual. It will require HR professionals to combine their more traditional tools in the employee experience cycle with text analytic tools to gauge the attitudes and feelings of their employees.

Nevertheless, these developments are happening here and now. Looking to the future it is likely that even more objective forms of analysis, such as voice and video recognition, will become commonplace in employee insight.



Judging by the evolution of such research, consumer and customer research is paving the way for HR professionals.

Michael Silverman is director at Silverman Research

www.silvermanresearch.com

WHAT'S ON IN HR?

To save you time leafing through the conference schedules, we've done it for you. For more information visit the conference websites below. So, get out there and network to find new ideas and develop your skills!

EMERGING MARKETS HR SUMMIT 1-4 April 2014, West End Luxury Hotel / The Waldorf Hilton, London

This summit is aimed at global HR leaders from mature, as well as emerging economies. It will focus on the new trends in emerging markets, human resources, unconventional ways of managing a diverse workforce, and recent developments in the continually evolving discipline of global HR. boc-uk.com

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT SUMMIT 3 April 2014, The Kensington Close Hotel, London

In order to avoid a "mass exodus" this year, employers need to engage staff with both their job and organisation. This summit will offer expert advice from leading professionals and will feature best practice case studies addressing how to implement cost effective and sustainable engagement initiatives. symposium-events.co.uk

HR BUSINESS PARTNER CONFERENCE 23 April 2014, Renaissance, Manchester

Featuring Nick Pascazio, Head of HR at the BBC, conference sessions will include, What makes a great HR business partner, Supporting and enhancing line manager capability, Building and delivering a talent pipeline strategy, and Effectively managing change. A great opportunity to build your own capabilities and understand external business factors. cipd.co.uk

HEALTH@WORK SUMMIT 2014 20 June 2014, London

This conference will feature insights and case studies from leading employers who will share their learning's from recent health initiatives. The event will address how to support employees who are suffering from mental ill health, how to build employee resilience and an evidence based business case to implement preventative wellbeing strategies. symposium-events.com

LONDON HR SUMMIT 10 July 2014, Grange Tower Bridge Hotel, London

The London HR Summit is an event specifically for those senior HR executives and managers looking to find innovative, leading HR service and product suppliers. As well providing a 'no hassle, no hard sell environment', the event provides great networking opportunities in a relaxed, business-like environment. forumevents.co.uk