

Employee needs assessment

Employers are recognizing that as the demands of the workplace become more rigorous, their ability to hire and hold on to well-qualified workers is a matter of basic business survival.

According to the 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce, workers who perceive that the organizational culture is supportive of their family and personal needs are less stressed; feel more successful in meshing work and family life; are more loyal to the company; are more committed to their employer; are more satisfied with their jobs; and are more likely to want to remain with their employers.

In addition to workers' perceptions, successful work/life strategies also increase productivity, reduce absenteeism, decrease the number of shortened or interrupted workdays (for instance due to family, elder, or child care issues), and lessen staff turnover.

To bring about change, organizations must realize that work/life issues are reflected in corporate culture and require systemic, corporation-wide solutions. The workplace culture must reflect a willingness to create a more responsive work environment that takes employees needs as well as business needs into account. Organizations find that such change, when planned and implemented thoughtfully and with employee concerns at heart, also significantly improves the bottom line.

A well-planned needs assessment can assist organizations in determining what the needs of employees are. A good needs assessment process should take into account the following:

Key aspects of the workforce

Identifying characteristics of the workforce is essential in order to understand employee needs and to develop an appropriate work/life strategy for the company. The following issues should be considered:

1 Workforce Composition

- What is the proportion of males to females?
- What is the age distribution of employees?
- How many employees have primary responsibility for care of dependents?
- What is the age range of those dependents?
- What are the different professional levels of all employees?
- What current labor agreements are in effect?

2 Evidence of Work/Life Stress

- Is there evidence of family-related problems, such as patterns of absenteeism, lateness, requests for leave and requests for part time status?
- Do employees report difficulty in finding suitable dependent care?
- Is there evidence of employee morale problems?

3 Employee Preferences

- What type of policies or benefits do employees want most (e.g., flexible time scheduling, resource and referral services, financial assistance in paying for care, on-or-near-site dependent care services)?
- What are the current family/dependent care arrangements that employees are using?
- How much is an employee able or willing to pay for services?

4 Labor Market Issues

- What are current and projected workforce needs?
- Is the company competitive in obtaining skilled workers?
- What effort and expense is required to recruit these employees?
- What is the industry average for retention and turnover of the workforce?
- What are competitors offering as benefits?
- What role do family benefits play in recruitment?

Key aspects of the company

Analyzing the nature of your business and your corporate goals can reveal how essential human capital and workforce issues are to the bottom line.

1 Corporate Culture and Management Style

- Is employee participation a corporate priority?
- If so, how is this priority expressed and communicated?
- What is the current overall labor /management climate?
- What was the labor/management climate in the near- and distant-past?
- What work/life policies or benefits are currently offered?
- When is the last time that work/life policies or benefits were reviewed for use and level of satisfaction?
- How are your work/life strategies developed?

2 Company Characteristics

- How large is the company?
- Is the company operating from more than one location and/or operating with more than one shift?
- Is its location accessible to community services?
- What is the involvement of the company in the local community?

These basic characteristics will be useful in determining the design and delivery of work/life benefits.

3 Fiscal Concerns

- What is the company's overall financial condition?
- Is it feasible to consider investing resources in work/life strategies?
- Is it feasible to consider not investing resources in work/life strategies?
- How do the company's costs for recruitment and turnover compare to others in the industry?

These issues will need to be considered before decisions to develop and implement new programs can be reached.

Some information suggested in this section may already be available through your company's human resource department.

Other information may be obtained from employees directly by way of an assessment or survey, or through focus groups.

Information on the local labor force may be obtained from the State of Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, within the Office of Labor, Marketing, Analysis and Information, 1100 N. Eutaw Street, Room 601, Baltimore, MD 21201, Web site: www.dllr.state.md.us, 410-767-2252 and from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC 20233 Web site: www.census.gov, 301-457-4100.

Designing an effective survey

Designing an effective survey instrument is a challenging task. The data you collect will only be as good as the instruments used to collect it, and the tabulation and analysis. Consultants with experience in needs assessment development (i.e. formulation of survey questions) and appropriate research skills including data collection, analysis, and interpretation can help design an effective survey. You can also contact your local child care resource and referral organization for help.

Should you decide to develop the instrument yourself, here are some suggestions for designing an effective employee survey:

1 Decide on what you want to know.

The questions you ask should be driven by your information needs. Determining what you want the survey to tell you is absolutely crucial.

2 Include the survey process into the normal business planning cycle.

Employee involvement, considerations regarding budget implications, and logistical concerns can be better addressed if the survey is done as part of the organization's normal planning cycle for goals, objectives, and budgets. By scheduling this way, the survey delivers the maximum "punch" possible.

3 Decide how to tabulate and analyze data before you gather it.

Decide how to analyze, chart, and graph the data before employees receive and complete the surveys. This approach avoids bias that comes when there are no set procedures for analysis. This may also determine how the questions will be phrased.

4 Formulate the questions.

Your questions must be clear and direct, leaving no room for interpretation errors.

5 Use multiple survey methods.

Using multiple techniques to ask about the same kind of information is a hallmark of good information gathering. In addition to refining a questionnaire and determining how, when and where to distribute the survey, you should also plan for focus groups and individual interviews. Since any surveying technique has its weaknesses, multiple methods give you the best chance for full and rich information from which to made decisions.

Keep the data anonymous, but communicate the actions. Organizations should keep survey information anonymous and confidential to increase the accuracy of the data received.

6 Create and communicate clear, specific actions from the survey data.

Once the needs assessment is completed and analyzed, the organization must decide on whether or not to proceed, and how to proceed. If the decision is made not to proceed or to defer action, employees should be informed of the decision and the reasons for it. If the decision is to proceed with the results of the assessment, the next step will be choosing, planning, and implementing programs, and determining how to involve employees in this process.

