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The questionnaire approach

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The questionnaire approach

Phillip G. Clampitt

INTRODUCTION

Most organizations are enchanted with questionnaires. The lure of a survey lies in the seeming simplicity of the methodology, the ostensive ease of administration and the apparent directness of interpretation. Yet, these are merely illusions based more on the ubiquity of surveys rather than their actual utility. For instance, researchers have shown that what survey respondents say they will purchase is often very different from what they actually buy (Morwitz et al., 1997). Mothers will not readily admit to spending more on dog food than on baby food. But, in fact, many do (Macht, 1998).

Methodological issues are largely a matter of the proper use of well-established scientific procedures. Administering a questionnaire and interpreting the results will require scientific understanding tempered with an artful consideration of organizational politics. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss both the art and science of developing, administering, analyzing, and interpreting surveys.

DEVELOPING A QUESTIONNAIRE

Developing an effective questionnaire requires respect for social scientific conventions and sound judgement. The discussion that follows is presented as a linear step-by-step procedure. Generally, this is a useful way to proceed, but bear in mind that auditors may have to loop back and revisit a previous step.

Step 1: Research the organizational background

Having an understanding of the organization is essential to developing a useful survey. Why? It allows auditors to make reasonable judgements about the inevitable tradeoffs involved in the survey process. For instance, learning that the general education level of employees is low implies that adjustments are necessary in the length and complexity of the questionnaire. Indeed with
millions of adults considered functionally illiterate, there are limits on the utility of written surveys. The organizational background also allows auditors to ascertain the best ways to administer the survey. For instance, e-mail might be a good administrative tool for some organizations (Goldhaber, 2002). Finally, the organizational background will aid in the proper interpretation of the data. One audacious student auditor became enamored with data indicating that none of the employees had worked for the organization for more than 4 years. He proceeded to ‘illuminate’ the company president with the following observation: ‘If you can’t retain employees for more than four years, you’ve got a turnover problem of major proportions. This fact alone tells me that employees can’t be satisfied with your communication practices.’ The president calmly replied that the ‘company is only four years old’. Then he thanked the audit team for their efforts and quickly ushered them out the door.

The ‘100 facts’ exercise is one way to gather this background information. The objective is simple: develop a list of 100 facts about the organization. This is merely an exploratory procedure, so the order and level of specificity of the facts are not really important. In a way, this is like a detective doing an initial scan of a crime scene, looking for any kind of information that might provide a useful lead. Box 3.1 provides some categories of facts that might be useful. This information can be gathered in all sorts of ways including interviews with key personnel, observations of organizational practices, and examination of corporate documents (employee handbooks, newsletters, annual reports, etc.). Once the facts are gathered, it is important for the audit team to discuss the implications of their findings: What tradeoffs will we need to make? What are the constraints we will be working under? What are employee expectations regarding the survey? Preliminary answers to questions of this sort provide valuable insights later in the process.

**Step 2: Ascertain the purpose**

This step may appear to be straightforward, but years of experience suggest that it is not. In fact, it may be the most difficult step of all. The critical

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**Box 3.1 100 ‘facts’: some examples**

- Demographic information about employees
- Layers of management
- Communication tools frequently used
- Dates of previous surveys
- Locations of employees
- Departmental structure
question is: After the survey is completed, what does the organization want to happen? Or, as I have asked CEOs, ‘How will you assess the effectiveness of this process?’ Sometimes organizations only have a vague notion about how they will use the results. Auditors need to help them clarify their desires. There are a variety of objectives including assessing:

- the communication competence of employees
- the conflict management style of employees
- the effectiveness of communication channels (newsletters, e-mail, etc.)
- the adequacy of information dissemination
- the quality of organizational relationships
- employee satisfaction with communication
- employee understanding of major initiatives
- the effectiveness of top management communication.

Each of these may imply a different type of survey or even methodology. Sometimes various parts of the organization have different objectives in mind. The senior management team may only want to ‘get the pulse’ of the organization, while some managers will use the data to drive specific changes in their departments. Reconciling these often conflicting objectives needs to be done in the planning stages. For example, if managers are not convinced they will receive some benefit from the process, they will not readily encourage their employees to participate.

**Step 3: Consider a variety of existing instruments**

Questionnaires are often referred to as ‘instruments’, and with good reason. They are the tools of the trade. Like all tools they are designed for a specific purpose; hammers are for nails and screwdrivers for screws. Unfortunately, there are times when apprentices hammer in the screws; it may work but it is not particularly elegant or effective. For instance, asking employees in a survey about how often they use internal web sites to access corporate information is probably a waste of paper. Counting the number of ‘hits’ on certain pages is more likely to yield useful information (Sinickas, 1998). This issue is discussed in more depth in Chapter 9.

Organizational communication scholars have used hundreds of instruments. The ones that are routinely used can be classified into two types: process and comprehensive instruments (Downs et al., 1994). The process instruments examine communication at a more micro-level, investigating issues such as conflict management, team building, communication competence or uncertainty management (Clampitt and Williams, 2005). The comprehensive instruments examine communication practices on a more macro-level, such as satisfaction with the communication climate or supervisory communication. Both kinds of instrument have their place, but this
section briefly reviews some of the most widely used instruments that are of a comprehensive nature. More extensive reviews of the instrument can be found in the existing literature. In most cases, complete versions of the surveys can be obtained from these sources (e.g., Rubin et al., 1994; Greenbaum et al., 1988; Downs and Adrian, 2004). These instruments have generally proven to be reliable, valid and useful in a vast range of organizations.

**Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ)**

When Downs and Hazen (1977) developed this instrument, they were investigating the relationship between communication and job satisfaction. They were successful. Generally the more satisfied employees were with communication, the more satisfied they were with their jobs. However, certain types of communications, like those with the supervisor, tended to be more important than others. After extensive testing, Downs and Hazen (1977) isolated eight key communication factors: communication climate, relationship with supervisors, organizational integration, media quality, horizontal communication, organizational perspective, relationship with subordinates, and personal feedback. Other scholars have generally confirmed the reliability and validity of the instrument (Hecht, 1978; Crino and White, 1981; Clampitt and Girard, 1987, 1993; Pincus, 1986). For example, scholars from the Netherlands found ‘evidence of criterion-related validity, indicating that CSQ results can provide insight into aspects of the organization’s internal communication system that significantly influence employees’ overall level of communication satisfaction’ (Zwijze-Koning and de Jong, 2007, p. 279). The survey consists of 40 core questions, with five items devoted to each of the eight factors. In addition, there are six questions about job satisfaction and productivity. A databank exists that can be consulted for comparative purposes (see www.imetacomm.com/CME3 – ‘Research Database’ tab). It is relatively easy to administer and can be completed in less than 15 minutes. The CSQ may not provide all the details necessary for specific action plans. For example, it does not directly address top management communication and decision-making (Zwijze-Koning and de Jong, 2007). However, it does provide an effective overview of potential problem areas that can be further investigated.

**ICA Audit Survey**

Gerald Goldhaber led a team of scholars from the International Communication Association in the development of a package of instruments designed to assess organizational communication practices (Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979; Goldhaber and Krivonos, 1977; Goldhaber, 1976; Downs, 1988). In 1979, the ICA ended official sponsorship of the project but the methodology lives on in the public domain (Goldhaber, 2002). Many people still refer to it as the ‘ICA Audit’. After over 8 years of development, one of the principal
diagnostic tools that emerged from this collaboration was the ‘ICA Audit’ Survey or the Communication Audit Survey. The questionnaire consists of 122 questions divided into eight major sections:

1. Amount of information received about various topics versus amount desired.
2. Amount of information sent about various topics versus amount desired.
3. Amount of follow-up versus amount desired.
4. Amount of information received from various sources versus amount desired.
5. Amount of information received from various channels versus amount desired.
6. Timeliness of information.
7. Organizational relationships.
8. Satisfaction with organizational outcomes.

The first five sections use a similar scaling format. On a 1 (very little) to 5 (very great) scale, employees are asked to rate the amount of information they ‘now receive’ on a given topic such as ‘organizational policies’. In a parallel scale, respondents are asked about the amount of information they ‘need to receive’ on ‘organizational policies’ or some other topic. Then a difference score can be generated that compares employees’ information needs with the amount actually received. Some questions about the validity of the instrument and the utility of the difference scores have been raised (Downs et al., 1981). Subsequent revisions of the instrument have tried to address these concerns (DeWine and James, 1988). In general, this instrument is one of the boldest and most comprehensive attempts to measure all aspects of an organization’s communication system. A version of the instrument, adapted by the editors of this book, is included in the Appendix.

**Organizational Communication Development audit questionnaire**

Osmo Wiio and his Finnish colleagues developed the Organizational Communication Development (OCD) audit questionnaire as part of an assessment package built around the Delphi technique. (This technique is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.) Their purpose was straightforward: ‘determine how well the communication system helps the organization to translate its goals into desired end-results’ (Greenbaum et al., 1988, p. 259).

The OCD is actually a refined version of an earlier survey (LTT) developed by Wiio in 1972 and administered to some 6000 employees in 23 Finnish organizations. One version contains 76 items that are grouped into 12 dimensions:
1 Overall communication satisfaction.
2 Amount of information received from different sources – now.
3 Amount of information received from different sources – ideal.
4 Amount of information received about specific job items – now.
5 Amount of information received about specific job items – ideal.
6 Areas of communication that need improvement.
7 Job satisfaction.
8 Availability of computer information systems.
9 Allocation of time in a working day.
10 Respondent’s general communication behavior.
11 Organization-specific questions.
12 Information-seeking patterns.

More recently refined versions have fewer dimensions and items (Wiio, 1975, 1977). Because of confidentiality concerns, the instrument has not been subjected to some psychometric tests used to assess other surveys (Greenbaum et al., 1988). Yet, the OCD addresses several issues that are not covered by the other instruments.

**Organizational Communication Scale**

Roberts and O’Reilly (1973) originally developed the Organizational Communication Scale (OCS) while working on research for the US Office of Naval Research. The scale was developed to compare communication practices across organizations. The OCS comprises 35 questions that can be broken down into 16 dimensions. Employees use 7-point Likert scales to respond to items about the following dimensions:

- Trust for supervisor
- Influence of supervisor
- Importance of upward mobility
- Desire for interaction
- Accuracy
- Summarization
- Gatekeeping
- Overload.

Additional questions ask employees about the percentage of time they spend in the following communication activities: upward communication (factor 9), downward communication (10), and lateral or horizontal communication (11). Another series of items ask about the percentage of time using various modes of communication (12–15). A final question (factor 16) asks about employees’ general level of communication satisfaction. This instrument is by far the shortest one reviewed in this section. It has a couple
of unique content areas like ‘summarization’ and ‘influence of supervisor’ that other instruments do not contain. Other scholars have found that variables like this may have an important impact on organizational communication practices. Yet, because the instrument is quite abbreviated, it may be difficult to unearth other issues that may be problematic, such as inter-departmental communication.

The obvious question is: Which instrument is best? That depends on the purpose of the audit and the constraints on the audit process. If, for example, time was limited, it would be difficult to use the ICA Audit Survey. The best advice is to carefully review all the alternatives. There are several works that can aid in that process (e.g. Downs and Adrian, 2004; Rubin et al., 1994; Greenbaum et al., 1988). As a starting point, Table 3.1 provides points of comparison between the surveys reviewed above.

### Step 4: Determine the proper instrument – either existing or custom-designed

There are two basic options: choose a pre-existing instrument or develop one. There are benefits and costs to each approach. Pre-existing instruments generally have been scientifically tested and developed by professionals. Therefore auditors can be fairly sure that the survey is valid – it measures what they think it measures. And they can be reasonably certain that the instrument is reliable – the results are stable over time. Typically discussions of reliability and validity can be found in the research literature about the instrument. Moreover, normative data are often available that will allow some comparisons between organizations.

On the other hand there are several potential disadvantages in using a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developer</th>
<th>CSQ</th>
<th>ICA</th>
<th>OCD2</th>
<th>OCS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of items</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaling device</td>
<td>Satisfaction level</td>
<td>Likert-type</td>
<td>Satisfaction level</td>
<td>Likert-type others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended questions</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Databank available</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average completion time</td>
<td>10–15 minutes</td>
<td>45–60 minutes</td>
<td>30–40 minutes</td>
<td>5–10 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
pre-existing instrument. The authors may need to grant permission to use the survey. Some of the questions on the survey may not be applicable to the organization. A few of the most frequently used questionnaires are too long to administer via the internet.

Developing a custom-designed questionnaire poses some unique challenges. Almost anybody can compile a list of seemingly insightful questions. But it is foolhardy to assume that this is what constitutes a useful instrument. There is an art to constructing a useful questionnaire. There are the scientific issues of validity and reliability to consider. For example, the wording of a question can have a significant impact on how it is answered. Consider the following survey item:

Do you approve or disapprove of enhancing our employee newsletter in order to improve organizational communication?

This particular question introduces a number of problems. First, it is bipolar and offers respondents only two choices. What if employees have an attitude somewhere on the continuum between approve or disapprove? Second, the question makes the dubious assumption that a newsletter will actually improve ‘organizational communication’ (which may mean something different to every employee). In fact, employees’ attitudes about the newsletter and ‘organizational communication’ may be two separate issues. Finally, what could be done with the results gleaned from this question? In the unlikely event that significant numbers of employees ‘disapproved’, then what actions are implied? Should the newsletter actually be discontinued? Or are respondents asking for changes in the format of the newsletter? Or are employees upset about the content of the newsletter? These cautions are not meant to discourage but only to warn that it is not as simple as it seems.

If auditors choose to develop a survey, it is important to consult the literature about how to do so (e.g. Edwards et al., 1997; Fink, 2002). This can be useful for a number of reasons. Well-developed custom-designed surveys are often better suited to employees of a particular organization. They tend to use terms familiar to employees. Custom-designed surveys typically target more specific issues than their more generic cousins. For instance, none of the major instruments reviewed in the previous section asks about how effectively management communicates the need to control costs, yet in one company this was the most critical communication issue.

The choice of instruments is critical to the success of the audit process. As a rule of thumb, for those first learning about the process, it is best to use a pre-existing tool and then make adaptations to the instrument.
Step 5: Make appropriate adaptations to the survey

Two types of modifications need to be considered. First, what demographic data are needed? Sometimes the demographic data can be helpful in isolating problem areas. For instance, in one audit there were dramatic differences between the way females and males viewed the effectiveness of the communication system. Second, what departmental or unit breakdowns are needed? This is always a tricky issue. The breakdowns need to be specific enough to isolate areas of concern but not so specific that respondents feel their anonymity is compromised. A good rule of thumb: the smallest group size should be limited to seven people. Demographic and unit breakdown items should be included at the end of the survey. Thus, if employees feel uneasy about providing that information, they will at least answer the substantive questions.

PLANNING THE ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESS

Sound administrative procedures are essential for an effective audit. This section provides a number of guidelines to improve the integrity of the administrative process.

1 Determine the sample size necessary to fulfill the objectives

Auditors have two basic choices: (a) survey everyone who wants to participate, or (b) survey a sample of the population. If possible, opt for the first choice. There are two reasons for this recommendation. First, surveys are often used as a tool to set new organizational agendas, such as changing the performance appraisal system. If a sample is used, then those who did not participate can resist the change by arguing that they ‘did not get a chance to provide any input’. In several cases we have encountered employees who said: ‘Management picked the employees for the survey. They got just the answers they wanted.’ Logical arguments about the statistical reliability of a sample hold little sway with people who feel emotionally isolated because they were not included. Second, surveying the entire population allows auditors to provide specific actionable results for all groups in the company. Results often reveal remarkable differences between various working groups. First-level supervisors may have entirely different issues to address with their groups than the organization as a whole needs to address. Few first-line supervisors would want only one person from their department to represent the views of the entire department. Yet, some uninformed managers misuse the data to draw exactly these kinds of conclusions about a work unit. Technically this problem is known as a lack of generalizability. Surveying the entire population can preclude this problem.
That said, there is a place for sampling. Samples are an efficient way to make useful generalizations about the entire population. Samples provide a way to avoid the often cumbersome efforts needed to survey the entire population. There are different kinds of samples that can be used to make sure that the results are reasonably unbiased (Fink, 2002). The critical issue is randomization. That is, everyone has an equal chance of being surveyed. However, some executives are tempted to be a little ‘fast and loose’ with this principle. So, exercise caution.

2 Develop an administrative protocol

Failure to adequately address administrative issues is one of the more subtle ways to undermine a communication audit. The quality of the data may directly turn on how employees are motivated to participate, and how the survey is distributed. These issues are related to one another and the discussion that follows focuses on how to make the appropriate tradeoffs.

How can employees be motivated to participate?

Most organizations do not make completing a survey a mandatory job requirement. Therefore, auditors are faced with the task of motivating employees. This is becoming increasingly difficult because surveys are almost as common as junk mail. And many employees treat surveys just like another piece of junk mail. There are really two aspects to this quandary. First, how can employees’ fears be disabused? Second, how can employees be persuaded that participation is important?

Employees often fear that somehow the results of their survey will come back to haunt them. For instance, an employee who candidly criticizes his or her boss might be passed over for a promotion. Generally, this means that employees need to be guaranteed anonymity. Without that guarantee they are less likely to provide frank responses. This is directly tied to the issue of who should administer the survey. Usually, an outside consultant is the best choice; the supervisor, the worst choice. Even if employees suspect that their survey can fall into the hands of supervisors, there can be a problem. That is why interoffice mail is not the preferred method for collecting survey data, although the survey could be distributed via interoffice mail. When we use survey sessions to administer surveys, we often make a theatrical production of placing completed surveys in a locked box. In fact, we usually destroy individual surveys after the data are coded into the computer.

How the data will be used is another motivational issue. One company used survey results to assign bonuses for supervisors. When the supervisors found out, they actively lobbied their workers for ‘votes’ on the survey. This is one of the worst uses imaginable of a communication audit. In another situation, we discovered after interviewing members in a unit, that the data on satisfac-
tion with training programs were tainted. Many of the employees admitted that they artificially inflated the ratings on the training questions because they were sick of going to mandatory training classes. Both of these situations highlight the motivational impact of the decisions regarding how the data will be used.

Assuming that employee fears can be minimized, there are a variety of ways to inspire participation. Frankly, some organizations ‘bribe’ employees with raffles, gifts, and door prizes. Others publicize less direct or tangible rewards such as improvements in working conditions or the ‘opportunity to express your opinion’. Either way, the WIFM issue (What’s In It For Me?) is being addressed. There are more altruistic appeals that work in some companies, such as suggesting there is a kind of civic obligation to complete the questionnaire. One paper mill appealed to workers’ sense of duty by comparing the survey process to maintenance procedures on their machines. Mill workers may not like to do it, but it is necessary to keep the organization running efficiently. These appeals could be characterized as WIFO issues (What’s In It For the Organization?). Typically, the WIFM issues prove more effective than the WIFO issues (Clampitt, 2007).

**How will the data be collected?**

There are several administrative options. One commonly used method is to administer the survey in a group setting. For instance, employees may be scheduled to complete the survey in the corporate training room. This method allows the auditor to brief participants before they take the survey. The briefing generally involves the following elements:

- describing the purpose of the audit
- discussing how the data will be used
- providing assurances about confidentiality
- explaining how to complete the survey
- discussing the feedback process
- answering any questions.

Using this approach often increases employee trust in the process by decreasing their anxiety. Participants are also more likely to be motivated to complete the survey.

There are several potential disadvantages of survey groups. One potential disadvantage is that they can raise employee expectations too high. A synergy may be created by the meetings in which employees may expect management to respond to concerns more quickly than is possible. Another potential disadvantage involves logistics. Can the audit team secure enough rooms to administer the survey? Does the team have enough time to set up the schedule and actually administer the survey? Do the rooms provide sufficient
anonymity for participants? These are the kinds of questions that need to be considered when opting for this choice.

Sending the survey through the post or interoffice mail is a common administrative procedure. Typically this maximizes coverage, allowing you to reach employees who are geographically dispersed, who work on different shifts or in different time zones. However, there are some tradeoffs. Confidentiality concerns may be raised if the completed surveys are returned via interoffice mail. It is also more difficult to motivate employees to participate in the process. Consequently, rates of return for mailed surveys are often relatively low when compared to other methods. For instance, one company distributed a survey in the mail to one division, and scheduled survey sessions for a sister division. The participation rates were 25% and 55%, respectively.

Many organizations use internet-based administrative procedures. There are a number of issues that must be addressed with this approach, one being the confidentiality of the data. Employees must believe that they cannot be identified in order for them to provide candid responses. Another issue to address is the length of the survey. Internet-based surveys work fairly well if the survey is short because most users will not fill out a lengthy survey using this medium. As a result, the auditors are restricted to a few relevant questions, forcing them to make some tough decisions about which issues are relevant. Consequently, the results may be less comprehensive than those attained through other procedures.

However, the main advantages of internet-based surveys are the speed and the ease with which results can be tabulated. They are an effective way to check the ‘pulse’ of the communication system on a routine basis. Auditors can determine the concerns of employees and use the data to quickly address those issues. This is similar to how skilled politicians use opinion polls: they track public opinion on a few key issues and then fine-tune their messages accordingly. One prominent scholar argued that ‘this type of survey can be completed (developed and implemented) within 4 weeks at less than one tenth the cost of a traditional survey and with response rates ranging from 60% to 70%’ (Goldhaber, 2002, p. 452).

One manufacturing plant with 1000 employees uses this approach quite effectively. This plant creates a ‘pulse report’ by e-mailing a survey every other week to approximately 50 randomly selected employees (see Box 3.2). Employees are asked eight closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions. They generally complete the survey in less than 5 minutes and are ‘rewarded’ with a raffle ticket. The company then posts the results and management responses to employee concerns on an electronic bulletin board. The plant uses the data to continually track employee concerns and determine the effectiveness of the managerial communication strategy. This has proven particularly helpful in providing direction for meetings, suggesting articles for the newsletter, and planning for organizational changes.

Some auditors take this approach one step further. For example, they


**Box 3.2 Pulse report**

*Directions: Place an X in the appropriate space below.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I understand where the plant is headed in the next quarter.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I understand why the plant is heading in the direction it is.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I believe we need to reduce costs in the plant.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I have the tools to do my job effectively.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I am actively trying to control costs in the plant.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Directions: Place a number between 0–100 in the appropriate space.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Number 0–100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. On your last shift, how many people made positive comments about the plant?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. On your last shift, how many people made negative comments about the plant?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. On your last shift, how many incidents did you witness where someone took an unnecessary safety risk?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Directions: Please fill in a written response in the appropriate space.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Please write your response below</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. What is your most important job-related concern?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. If you could ask the plant manager one question, what would it be? Why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
construct a short, eight to ten item survey composed of broad, macro-level communication questions. Issues like the communication climate or decision-making are the focal point of the questions. The computer instantly tabulates the responses and generates follow-up questions based on the employee’s answers to the macro-level questions. This type of survey has the potential to provide the kind of depth and breadth necessary for a finely tuned communication strategy.

It is also worth flagging a further issue – that is, the impact of web-based surveys on response rates. One meta-analysis of 45 published and unpublished comparisons of web and other survey modes found that, on average, web surveys delivered a response rate 11% lower than their counterparts (Manfreda et al., 2008). Clearly, there are no perfect data collection methods, and many of the approaches discussed here can be used to ameliorate some of these negative effects, such as taking clear steps to engage people’s attention and support. It remains the case that web-based surveys have many advantages, and these must be judiciously weighed against the potential impact on response rates.

3 Test the administrative procedures and questionnaire

This is a particularly helpful step when using a new instrument. You can determine what questions are difficult to understand and those that do not yield important information. Even with pre-existing questionnaires, it is important to pilot test the instrument and administrative procedures. For example, one company selected a survey that made extensive use of the word ‘team’. One unit in the company had just been through some poorly conceived and executed training about ‘team-based’ management. Whenever these employees heard the word ‘team’, they cringed. Consequently, this particular group systematically rated the survey questions containing the ‘T-word’ low. In short, the negative connotations trumped the intended denotations of the auditors. Therefore, they decided to replace the ‘T-word’ with ‘work group’.

Testing the survey is typically done in a focus group format. A random selection of employees are asked to complete the survey. A facilitator then interviews the group, asking questions such as:

- What did you like most about the survey?
- What did you like least?
- Were the instructions understandable?
- What questions were difficult to answer? Why?
- Were there any words that you did not understand?

Typically a funnel questioning sequence works best, starting with the general questions and then moving to the more specific ones. Using this
approach allows auditors to discover issues they may not have thought of, like readability problems associated with the physical layout of the survey.

4 Decide how feedback will be provided

There are several crucial questions that need to be answered: What format will be used to present the results? What will be the auditor’s role in interpreting the results? How will the results be communicated? How will you transition from the results to the next step? This section will address each of these issues.

What format will be used to present the results?

Quantitative data can be reported in any number of different ways and with varying levels of statistical sophistication. Some organizations want graphics, while others prefer simple numeric reporting, typically including the mean, standard deviation, and frequency. While all these decisions do not need to be made before the survey is administered, they need to be discussed.

There are also options in reporting qualitative data. Some companies only want a listing of employee answers to open-ended questions. This is fairly easy to do but it often creates some difficulties. For instance, managers often play the ‘who said that?’ game when encountering a particularly touching or distressing statement. The focus of the discussion tends to be driven by the poignant or enraging statement. Thus a sense of balance and proportion is often lost. Others prefer that the data be content-analyzed. This approach tends to promote more thoughtful and balanced interpretations of the data. However, it does take a great deal of time and effort to properly content-analyze data.

What will be the auditor’s role in interpreting the results?

Some senior executives feel they need little assistance in interpreting data. In fact, they may only hire an auditor to administer the survey and ‘crunch the numbers’. This can present an ethical quandary because some executives believe they are qualified to interpret the data, when in reality, they are not. For instance, on one survey, a question asking about employees’ satisfaction levels with ‘working for your supervisor’ yielded the following results:

Department A = 6.2 mean (Scale: 0–10, low–high)
Department B = 6.0 mean

Based on this data, one of these ‘qualified’ executives drew the dubious conclusion that Department A was much more effectively managed than
Department B. The results were not statistically significant, but the executive insisted that this result provided conclusive evidence to support his interpretation. Because of similar instances, the auditor refused to work with the company on future projects. Clearly, not all executives approach data analysis in this way. Since most organizations need at least some help interpreting the results and to fend off situations such as this, it is important to negotiate up front about this type of situation.

One way to strategically address these issues with the client is to provide sample output, reports, and feedback protocols during the initial negotiations. Then auditors can be sure that the issues are discussed and the client can make any necessary adjustments.

**How will the survey results be communicated?**

Typically, the results are presented in both an oral and a written format. Generally, senior management receives the report first. In some instances, the process ends here and senior management never release the results to anyone. Long-term, this is counterproductive because participation in future surveys is less likely. More often, the results are then rolled out or ‘downloaded’ to other levels in the organization (Clampitt and Williams, 2007). Usually a written summary is then prepared for all participants, and at times employees are offered the option of attending open briefing sessions.

**How will you transition from the results to the next step?**

Clearly senior management need to take some time to process the diagnostic phase of the audit before moving to the ‘next step’. There are two basic possibilities:

1. Sometimes senior management want to have all the action plans in place before releasing the diagnostic data to employees. In that case, employees simultaneously receive a diagnostic report from the auditors and a set of responses in the form of an action plan from senior management.

2. Other organizations value employee input and make a clearer distinction between the diagnosis and the prescription. Thus, they present the audit results and then merely outline the procedures that will be used to respond to the diagnosis.

Communicating the audit results is fairly straightforward. A more difficult issue involves discerning the ‘action step’ in which the following concerns are addressed:

- What are the major issues?
- When should they be addressed?
How should they be addressed?  
Who should address them?

The key point is to draw a clear line between diagnosing and prescribing.

**ANALYZING THE DATA**

How quantitative and qualitative data are displayed has a profound impact on the ultimate interpretations of the information. Information displays influence our reasoning, inform our intuitions, and imply corrective action. Ineffective displays make it difficult to draw proper conclusions and can lead us into discussions of the trivial. Tufte (1983, p. 9) made this compelling argument:

Modern data graphic can do much more than simply substitute for small statistical tables. At their best, graphics are instruments for reasoning about quantitative information. Often the most effective way to describe, explore, and summarize a set of numbers – even a very large set – is to look at pictures of those numbers. Furthermore, of all methods for analyzing and communicating statistical information, well-designed data graphics are usually the simplest and at the same time the most powerful.

Therefore, auditors need to carefully think about the choices made in displaying the data. This issue is discussed more fully in Chapter 10. With that in mind, consider the following analytical options.

**Quantitative data**

A variety of techniques, ranging from simple to complex, can be used to present and analyze the numeric data. Some basic options are reviewed below:

**Rank-order method**

Using the means from each question, rank related items from high to low. For instance, if auditors were using the ICA Audit Survey, then items about the timeliness of information could be ranked in one table. Another table would contain items regarding organizational relationships, and so forth. For the Communication Satisfaction Survey, we usually rank all 40 items in one table. Statistical tests can be used to group the items on the tables into high, medium and low ‘zones’. These procedures can aid the auditor in identifying underlying themes or patterns in the data. Items will often appear in some natural conceptual clumps, like a group of items related to ‘information dissemination’ versus others related to ‘supervisory relationships’. The major
drawback of the rank-order method is that it forces the identification of strengths and weaknesses. But what if all the means are above (or below) the conceptual midpoint? How do auditors make sense of a situation like that? The next technique addresses that very issue.

**Databank comparisons**

Most of the commonly used surveys have databanks available. An example of this is the Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire databank, composed of the results of 26 audits (see www.imetacomm.com/CME3 – ‘Research Database’ tab). This allows other auditors the option to compare their organization’s results with those in the databank. Many businesses are particularly keen on this approach because it is a type of ‘best practice’ comparison. Statistical tests can be used to assess significant differences between the norm and the targeted organization.

The excitement generated by a databank comparison should be tempered by the inevitable problems those comparisons create. First, organizations often differ from one another in significant ways and it may be inappropriate to use the databank as a comparison point. For example, in a business organized around the team concept, a ‘good’ score compared to the databank may not be good enough. Other organizations that are less dependent on teams could find the same result gratifying. Second, sometimes the databank comparisons reveal seemingly contradictory findings to other analytical techniques. In one organization, the highest ranked items on the survey revolved around supervisor communication, yet even these scores were well below the databank norms. Is supervisory communication a strength or weakness? That, of course, depends on whether auditors take an internal or external focus of analysis. This particular organization was in a similar position to a football team with a ‘star’ player who was merely average when compared to others in the league.

**Factor scores**

Most of the standard audit surveys have been tested and reveal various key factors. These are groupings of questions that appear to measure similar underlying issues. Some are easy to spot, like all the questions relating to supervisory communication, while others are more difficult. These require more sophisticated statistical techniques like factor analysis, principal component analysis, and regression analysis. These can often be helpful in determining key relationships between variables. Some auditors use the predetermined factors as the basis for their analysis. Statistically savvy researchers use a variety of techniques to draw their conclusions.

All these techniques are viable options for the preliminary analysis of your
data. Often they are used in various combinations. The fundamental point is to recognize both the strengths and the drawbacks of each technique.

**Qualitative data**

Since many questionnaires contain at least a few open-ended questions, it is important to briefly consider how to scientifically analyze this data. The process is relatively straightforward, yet at times intellectually taxing.

1. One auditor reads over all the responses to a given question and looks for underlying themes. Even though the respondents will use different terms to describe their concerns, usually a stable set of issues will emerge from the responses. Typical categories include ‘upward communication’, ‘quality of information’, and ‘co-worker communication’. There is no way to determine the ideal number of the categories. However, generally, anywhere from five to ten categories works best. If there are too few categories, it is difficult to make useful recommendations. If there are too many, the reliability becomes questionable. Content analysis is a blunt instrument; one can’t put too fine a point on the categories. And there are always some responses that are so idiosyncratic that they defy classification. Best to put those in a category called ‘other’.

2. Another auditor repeats step 1 while being shielded from the classification system developed by the other auditor. This, again, is a way to help improve reliability and validity.

3. The firewall comes down and the two auditors meet and share their respective category systems. After some discussion, they agree on a category system.

4. The firewall goes back up. Separately the auditors go back to the original set of responses and tally up the number of responses in each category. Often a respondent will make a comment that falls in two categories. Both should be noted, but auditors should record the number of ‘multiple-coded items’. Sometimes the data sets are so large that it is impossible to review all the responses or devote the time of two researchers to the analysis of one question. In these cases sampling techniques are the best option.

5. The firewall comes back down (for the final time). The researchers compare their coding decisions and check the number of agreements. They reconcile any differences. This is the reliability test and should be 75% or better. If not, the category system is flawed and needs to be revised.

6. Based on the data, the auditors construct a chart summarizing their data. There is an example in Chapter 13.

Some clients will insist on seeing the entire list of employee comments. This is fine, if used in conjunction with content analysis procedures, and if care is
taken to ensure that the responses remain anonymized. Well executed content analysis helps us to more systematically process these responses as it provides a sense of organization and proportion to the data. The analysis provides a shield from a particularly eloquent statement, venomous remark or catchy comment skewing the interpretation.

**INTERPRETING THE RESULTS**

Properly interpreting the results of an audit requires discipline, insight, and perspective. Auditors need to be disciplined enough to not jump to conclusions. Insight is required to look beyond the surface and search for deeper patterns. Perspective allows auditors to distinguish the trivial from the important. The dedicated auditor will acquire these attributes with experience. However, heeding the following suggestions can hasten the learning process.

**Erect a temporary firewall between the qualitative and the quantitative data**

The firewall provides discipline in the interpretative process. Numbers and words may paint different pictures. It is important to see both images before attempting to synthesize them. For instance, in a manufacturing plant, the numeric data pointed to a problem with the general communication climate. Yet, the chief complaint emerging from written questions involved ‘trash’ and the ‘dirty working environment’. If the auditors relied solely on the numeric data, they would have ignored the trash problem. Even if they viewed the qualitative data through the lens of the quantitative data, they would have minimized this important concern. Instead, the firewall allowed them to see that the ‘trash’ problem was a legitimate concern that the numeric section was simply not sensitive enough to pick up.

If there is a team of auditors, setting up a firewall is easy. Assign one group to examine the quantitative data and arrive at tentative conclusions. The other group does the same for the qualitative data. If this is not possible, then analyze one set of data and put aside the tentative conclusions. Then move to the other set of data.

As a rule of thumb, it is best to start with the qualitative data. Why? Sometimes auditors will unwittingly interpret the quantitative data and then *massage* the qualitative data to *confirm* the original findings.

**Anticipate various interpretations of the questions**

Professional survey designers scrupulously try to avoid highly ambiguous questions. Despite their best efforts, almost all surveys contain unclear
items. Not only can words be interpreted in various ways, there is also the issue of the contextual parameters of the question. One commonly used survey asks employees about their satisfaction with communication regarding ‘organizational changes’. In several audits, this item turned out to be a problem area. The question then became, ‘What changes are the employees talking about?’ The questions simply couldn’t be answered with the existing data. As Downs and Adrian (2004) insightfully noted about this dilemma, the main problem is that auditors may generate interpretations that are not faithful to the meanings as intended by the respondents.

There are two ways to address these dilemmas. First, auditors could make a ‘best guess’ based on other available evidence. Self-deception is always a possibility in this case. Positive thinking can lead us to accept the more benign of the possible interpretations. Second, further research could be conducted using other methods such as interviews or focus groups. Time permitting, this is the preferred alternative. Then auditors can have enough specificity to clearly address the issue.

**Discern the difference between more and less important items**

Experienced auditors guided by research findings soon learn that some survey items are more important than others. For instance, the Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire contains the following item: ‘Extent to which my supervisor trusts me’ (Downs and Adrian, 2004). Previous studies have demonstrated a high correlation between this question and the general communication climate (Clampitt and Downs, 1993). As a rule of thumb, if this item is low, then the satisfaction levels with other communication issues will be low. It is a bell-weather question. Moreover, questions about supervisors tend to be the most important communication items because employees have a high preference for information from their supervisors. On the other hand, items about the corporate newsletter are usually less salient. That is, they usually have less impact on the entire communication climate than other issues. Of course, it is far easier to make specific recommendations to improve a newsletter than it is to restore the trust between employees and their supervisors.

**Distinguish between macro- and micro-level concerns**

When the stock market takes a tumble, it does not mean that every stock, or even every sector of the market, is on the decline. Likewise, global results about the organization’s communication system may not be applicable to all departments and levels. For instance, the general results might indicate a problem with the timeliness of certain kinds of information. Yet, there may
be one or more departments in which this is not the primary concern. Identifying these pockets is important for two reasons. First, a pocket may be a place to look for a ‘best practice’ lesson. If one department has mastered the ‘timeliness’ issue, it might provide insight into how other departments could do the same. Second, action plans constructed for the entire organization might not be applicable to every part of the organization. In other words, by identifying the pockets you can avoid the ‘one size fits all’ mentality.

Identifying the pockets can provide specific focal points for each unit or department. Too often, organization-wide problems are quickly dismissed as everyone’s problems. Often, if it is everybody’s problem, then it is really nobody’s. This means auditors need to be very careful when discussing macro-level problems. Ideally the audit should identify major problems requiring specific actions that can be assigned to particular individuals or departments to solve. But the ideal is usually not the reality. ‘Improving trust between management and employees’ may be a worthy goal but who really ‘owns’ that problem? Thus, it is particularly important when talking with senior management about macro concerns to temper the remarks with discussions of ‘pocket’ differences.

**Synthesize the results of the qualitative and quantitative analyses**

There are essentially two possibilities:

- **Similar themes.** These are conclusions that all the data sources point to. They tend to be highly salient issues, although they may be stated in somewhat different ways. For instance, employees may make written comments such as, ‘I wish I knew how I was doing.’ A survey question revealing dissatisfaction with the ‘appraisal system’ could indicate a similar concern.

- **Dissimilar themes.** Inevitably some themes emerge from one data source that do not emerge from another. This does not mean those issues are unimportant. All data gathering methods have biases and one of the methods may not be sensitive to certain concerns.

Determining which issues to highlight in the report is a challenging task requiring thorough knowledge of the organization and insight gleaned from the organizational communication literature. The quality of this synthesis often determines the value of an audit to the organization.

**Contemplate actions that might be taken**

Audit results do not necessarily imply specific and direct actions. The ICA Audit Survey has one section asking employees to compare the amount of
information they receive on various topics with the amount of information they desire. In several audits, the amount desired exceeded the amount actually received in every topic area. So what? What can be done with these results? We ultimately concluded that the answers to these questions actually constituted a ‘curiosity index’ (Downs et al., 1981). If more information was provided on all the issues, then employees would be overwhelmed. Therefore, we had to use our judgement to discern where the really significant information gaps were. This meant we had to rely on our knowledge of the particular organizations as well as our general notions about organizational communication practices. For instance, we deemed information about job-related duties as more important than information about ‘benefits’, even though the benefits issue would have been easier to address.

As auditors enter the rather murky world of action plans, it is best to be tentative. Suggest several courses of actions that might address the issues, then the client can choose those that are most compatible with the organizational culture. Clearly separate the diagnostic results from the prescriptions. This protects the auditor’s credibility and allows the client to participate in the decision-making process. The result: a greater likelihood that the decisions will actually be implemented.

**CONCLUSION**

Scholars have devoted years of their lives to perfecting questionnaires and survey techniques. They have provided us with numerous valuable lessons and tools. In an age when surveys are as commonplace as weather forecasts, few people appreciate the art and science of the process. And like a weather forecast, few people recognize all the effort required to produce a fairly accurate picture of an extraordinarily complex phenomenon – organizational communication.