



## XpertHR Podcast: Trends in employee engagement

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- Noelle Murphy: Hi and welcome to this week's XpertHR podcast with me, Noelle Murphy. Today we're discussing employee engagement and emerging trends over the past few years. Joining us in the studio is Kate Pritchard, Director of Employee Research at ORC International, and the author of our *Good Practice Guide* on employee engagement surveys, which she has recently updated. So thanks for joining us today, Kate.
- Kate Pritchard: Great to be here.
- Noelle Murphy: So employee engagement has certainly moved on over the past few years. Could you run us through the biggest changes you've observed over this time? [0:00:49.7]
- Kate Pritchard: Yes, absolutely. It is an area that's changing as fast as any other, so it was great to have an opportunity to update this guide. One change is I'm delighted to say that the value of employee engagement is no longer in doubt. There was a time when I used to have detailed discussions with potential clients about engagement and the value of measuring engagement. This is no longer necessary. So employee engagement is really up there now as a key business metric for many organisations. Engagement surveys are absolutely commonplace and they're valued as a really good way of getting a clear understanding of current levels of engagement and how to improve them.
- I have to say that the work of David MacLeod and Nita Clarke back in 2009, which is still continuing, has had a big impact, through the Engage for Success movement. This has certainly helped to raise the profile of employee engagement. But I'd say that in 2017 engagement is certainly seen as a business essential. The role of surveys to measure and understand engagement is definitely accepted.
- Noelle Murphy: So that's a huge change now that nobody has to be persuaded around the value of researching employee engagement. You mentioned Engage for Success. Could you tell us just a little bit more about that? [0:01:51.5]
- Kate Pritchard: Sure. So David MaLeod and Nita Clarke were asked to write a report really to see whether engagement mattered within the UK. They produced a very influential report called *Engaging for Success* and since then, they've formed a movement called Engage for Success, which is a really great resource for HR practitioners. It's also got involvement of business leaders and thought leaders within the area, so it really is a great resource for anybody interested in this area.

They've got a great website called [engageforsuccess.org](http://engageforsuccess.org), with lots of great information, podcasts and case studies.

Noelle Murphy: So that's a big deal really, isn't it, if all the key stakeholders are involved, if you've got business leaders there working with that. So would you say you've seen any other changes? [0:02:30.8]

Kate Pritchard: Definitely. Technology has changed the way that we do employee engagement surveys. Gone are the days of long paper surveys, which could take significant effort to distribute and to process. Surveys are now nearly all online. Even more traditional industries are finding ways of getting staff to complete surveys online, even if they haven't got ready access to a computer, thinking of creative ways such as iPads in staff hubs or encouraging employees to use their own devices. So really the move online has had a lot of benefits, both in terms of ease of completion but also speed, in terms of getting results a lot faster.

Noelle Murphy: That was one of the big hurdles, wasn't it, trying to reach all of the more remote workers etc., so we can see technology's made a big difference there. [0:03:11.6]

Kate Pritchard: Absolutely, yeah.

Noelle Murphy: Along with improving the reach and responses, have you seen any changes to the type of questions that are now being asked? [0:03:19.9]

Kate Pritchard: I would say that surveys are becoming a bit more focused and concise. In terms of the broad range of issues it probably hasn't changed too much, although hot topics these days are things like diversity and inclusion, health and wellbeing at work, management of change – those sorts of areas are more likely to be covered than perhaps some of the more basic areas where organisations don't need to spend time asking and probing issues in a lot more detail. I'd say that the big change has been more focused surveys. Gone are the days of 100-question surveys.

Noelle Murphy: Okay, so things are becoming a bit more sophisticated really, and focused, as you said. I suppose one of the biggest things we've seen in HR is the impact of technology. It's having a huge impact within HR and the way that they're doing things. Would you say it has made a difference to response rates and turnaround times? [0:04:09.7]

Kate Pritchard: Definitely in terms of turnaround times. It used to take weeks to get survey results back when it was long paper surveys, but now that everything's moved digital we're looking at response times of days, even hours in some cases. It's really revolutionised that, in terms of speed.

In terms of response rates, we're certainly seeing that response rates have improved over the time that we've been doing employee engagement surveys. I think to an extent that's down to technology, but possibly more so that, as I mentioned, organisations are taking engagement seriously, and the main reason that employees will fill in a survey is if they believe that things will happen. So there is a

greater trust in the role of employee engagement surveys in driving change.

Noelle Murphy: We've seen that technology has improved response rates. Would you say that there is any change to the frequency that people are now surveying employees? [0:04:59.8]

Kate Pritchard: That's another big change, actually. Engagement surveys used to be very much an annual activity, and I guess with that, the focus of an organisation on engagement was also an annual activity. Following the survey, there'd be a drive to come up with some actions, but really after a couple of months that activity may have tailed off. There's now a real hunger for regular information on all sorts of topics, including employee engagement. We're seeing that pulse surveys are becoming very common for a lot of organisations, and typically every quarter organisations will be doing pulse surveys in between a census survey.

Noelle Murphy: What kind of things would a pulse survey tend to cover then? [0:05:36.6]

Kate Pritchard: That would be a very much cut-down version of a survey. I'd say no more than 10-20 questions, usually focusing on the questions that measure engagement so that we can see over the year whether engagement is stable or improving, but also really looking at the areas where action's being taken – which are the areas driving engagement? Where the organisation's putting effort to make improvements, just checking in on whether those activities are making a difference.

Noelle Murphy: Great, because that's what it's all about, isn't it? It's using the data to make improvements. [0:06:05.5]

Kate Pritchard: Absolutely. All of the survey information can provide really useful insights to organisations but if it's not acted on, then it's really not worth collecting. There needs to be a real desire to use the survey to make change.

What we're recognising is that meaningful change can't really happen from a to-do list. It's no longer about tactical actions on the back of a survey. We really need something bigger than that. We want to have a culture where everybody sees the value of engagement, everybody feels able to get involved in doing their bit to improve engagement, it's on-going rather than once a year, and everyone through the organisation sees the benefit of engagement.

This is the environment that our clients are striving for now, really trying to embed engagement within their business.

Noelle Murphy: This is really the crux of what employee engagement is about, isn't it? It's the quality of the two-way dialogue between employers and employees. And in light of that, would you say you've noticed a greater desire for employers to work on making what can sometimes be difficult changes for them or to have things reflected back to them that aren't necessarily comfortable? [0:07:05.2]

Kate Pritchard: Yeah, I do. I think that there is a bigger appreciation that engagement is important and that changes need to be made to improve engagement, but as we know, making change is hard and I guess it's quite telling that in the surveys that we do, we will find that about half of employees that complete the surveys don't believe that the survey will lead to action. So there's still a lot of work to be done here.

Noelle Murphy: The good thing is, though, that they're still obviously engaged in the measuring process, aren't they, in the surveying process? Because if you've got response rates of around 75% but yet half still believe that there isn't going to be much done as a result of the survey, that's still quite encouraging. [0:07:43.2]

Kate Pritchard: It is, but organisations shouldn't expect that response rates will stay high. There is definitely a relationship between high response rates and organisations that use the survey results positively.

Noelle Murphy: Okay. We've got the General Data Protection Regulation (the GDPR) on the horizon. Do you think this is going to have an impact at all on how research is conducted in this area? [0:08:05.5]

Kate Pritchard: It may well do, yes, certainly in some cases. It really depends to a large extent on current ways of working. For research providers, they should currently be working in line with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct, which is in line with GDPR requirements, but this is definitely something that companies should be mindful of and should really check out with their research provider.

Noelle Murphy: Okay, that's good advice there. And looking forward, what future changes do you think you'll see in the field of employee engagement surveys? [0:08:32.7]

Kate Pritchard: Well I think things are going to continue further down this path, that surveys will be more fluid, more regular. Feedback is going to become more and more continuous, and I think the effort of the HR team is no longer around managing a survey; it's really around interpreting information and making sure that it can be used to make a more successful workplace.

Noelle Murphy: It's back to the heart of the matter, though, isn't it? If employers ask all the right questions and do a very lovely survey but they do little with the information that they receive, then employee engagement is going to suffer, isn't it? [0:09:01.7]

Kate Pritchard: Absolutely. If you don't intend to use the information that you collect in an employee survey, don't bother doing it.

Noelle Murphy: Okay. That's great advice to end on there. Thanks very much, Kate. That brings us to the end of our podcast on emerging trends and changes in employee engagement. If you want to find out more, you can find our recently updated *Employee Engagement Good Practice Guide* on our website. Thanks very much for listening.