

# Voice of the Employee

Survey Research for the Real World

Voice of the Customer Analysis

**VoCAI**



## A3 White Paper: Voice of the Employee (VoE)

Research for the Real World

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## VoCAI

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## Voice of the Employee: Research for the Real World

### What is the purpose of your employee research?

There are two basic reasons why organizations conduct employee research and these reasons roughly correlate to the two basic types of scientific research. These reasons are:

- ▲ *To provide descriptive information that is useful for public (employee) relations efforts* such as spinning political and related messages. This is referred to as *enumerative research*, the most common example of which is *polling*.
- ▲ *To provide analytic information concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the existing employee/employer relationship* in an effort to solve real problems. This is referred to as *analytic research* of which, *Voice of the Employee (VoE)* by *Converge*, is an example.

The two types of research require different approaches to data gathering, analysis, interpretation and presentation. Before engaging in employee research, therefore, it is critical to first define the purpose of

that research: public relations or problem solving.

### VoE: Research for real world problems.

If the purpose of your employee research better spin messages for a public or employee relations effort, we can't help you. There are plenty of polling firms that can.

If the purpose of your employee research is solve problems, that is to bring some science to the identification of strength and weakness areas and provide an evidenced-based, rational approach to improving levels of employee loyalty, engagement and satisfaction – then VoE is for you.

Identifying real world problems means distinguishing the trivial many from the critical few. This is what VoE does:

- ▲ identify problems of real and practical importance to the business.
- ▲ support sound evidenced-based decision making in the development of HR policy and practice.

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- ▲ apply proper scientific/statistical methods to the analysis and interpretation of data.
- ▲ report results with ruthlessly honesty.

All employee survey research promises this, of course, but not all deliver. There are three reasons why.

1. ***All scientific/statistical research falls into one of two types: enumerative and analytic. In employee research, the wrong type is used.*** Use enumerative research methods to answer an enumerative research question and you get a right answer. Use enumerative methods to answer an analytic research question and you get the wrong answer.

In practice, almost all employee survey research is analytic in nature whereas the methods used to answer them are almost universally enumerative. This is particularly true when polling companies are contracted to conduct employee research. This, because polling is a form of enumerative research and polling firms tend to use methods with which they are familiar. The wrong methods are applied giving you the wrong answers – garbage in, garbage out.

*VoE is an analytic research methodology* (unlike polling) and will, therefore, give you the right answers

to your employee research questions. Specifically, specific areas of strength and weakness in your employee/employer relationship will be identified along with a clear set of actionable improvement priorities.

2. ***Statistical significance is confused with practical importance.*** Within statistical practice, ‘statistical significance’ has a specific technical definition, it means ‘detectable’. This meaning should not be confused with the everyday meaning of significance which is something of ‘practical importance’.

In practice, employee survey research is typically littered with statistically significant results. For example, the results among departments or between two employee groups may be said to be statistically significant, but that only means the differences were detectable, not that they are of any practical importance. The survey research is detecting the trivial many and failing to identify the vital few.

*VoE identifies differences of practical importance or real world significance – not statistical significance.* You will receive fewer *significant* results, but what is said to be significant, really is.

3. ***Corruption of evidence.*** *The* methods by which data is gathered, organized,

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analyzed and interpreted must follow sound scientific and statistical practice. Failure to apply the proper method corrupts the evidence.

In practice, corruption of evidence most frequently takes the form of *cherry picking* and *overreaching*. Examples include:

- ▲ the creation of statistical models that are said to predict employee engagement or loyalty and,
- ▲ the ranking of your company against others in a data base.

*VoE identifies real areas of strength and weakness that are of practical importance to management. That's it. No complicated or meaningless models or comparisons. Just a rigorous scientific approach to identifying real problems that when addressed, will improve the employer/employee relationship. When you think about it, there is a lot of benefit to keeping things simple..*

## The downside of doing it wrong.

Using enumerative or polling techniques to address real world problems concerning the employee/employer relationship has a downside. Some specific effects include:

- ▲ ***missed opportunities for improvement***, arising from an inability to identify the critical few items of practical importance to the business that comes from proper application of analytic (as opposed to enumerative) methods,
- ▲ ***wasted organizational effort addressing problems that don't exist***, arising from a failure to separate the statistically significant and trivial many, from the practically significant, but vital few.
- ▲ ***declining employee confidence that executives and management know what is going on***, as employees watch management continuously miss the mark when targeting improvement priorities,
- ▲ ***declining organizational credibility of the human resources function***, as corporate executives see little in the way of results for extensive HR activity based upon what becomes increasingly seen as questionable research.
- ▲ ***Increasing conflict and politicization within the organization***, as various organizational units attempt to be seen addressing problems they know, do not in fact, exist.

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## The upside of doing it right.

VoE by Converge presents some real opportunities to HR management. Here are some of the benefits reported by our clients:

- ▲ **Greater levels of employee and management engagement.** The presentation and feedback process emphasizes management at various levels taking responsibility for their results. VoE feedback sessions put less emphasis on our interpretation of things and more on teaching managers and supervisors how to interpret their results. People take responsibility when the research process is built with the purpose of helping people solve problems.
- ▲ **The employer/employee relationship improves.** By identifying real problems of critical importance to the business and separating these from the trivial many, VoE enables management to focus corrective action on those areas that really make a difference. Employee loyalty, engagement and satisfaction rise as the organization addresses and fix problems in the relationship.
- ▲ **Improved credibility for management and HR.** Because the results from VoE make sense to people, credibility for

management and HR builds. A number of our clients have commented on the difference in feedback sessions after switching to VoE. Previous to VoE, sessions had a negative feel characterized by quizzical looks as people strained to figure out the 'engagement model' (or see its relevance) and grappled with results that didn't fit with personal experience.

This is contrasted with the positive feel with VoE feedback meetings that are characterized by nodding heads, plenty of note taking, discussions of root cause and corrective actions.

- ▲ **Clarity.** Above all, VoE provides clarity. Results make sense to people and are presented in a manner that supports problem solving. There is no *economist*<sup>1</sup> with VoE. Your people can tell the difference between *b.s.* and a *B.Sc.* Your employee research should be associated with the latter.

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<sup>1</sup> *Economist* (e kon' o mist' ing) 1. The act or process of converting limited evidence into grand claims by means of punning, multiplicity of meaning, and overreaching. 2. The belief or practice that empirical evidence can only confirm and never disconfirm a favored theory. 3. Conclusions that are theory-driven, not evidenced-based. Edward Tufte, Beautiful Evidence, Graphical Press, 2006

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## The VoE FAQ.

VoE is different. Our reports generate a lot of interest but also a lot of questions. Here are some of the questions we get most frequently.

***My previous employee research highlighted over 60 statistically significant findings. VoE only identified 5. Why? (It seems I am getting less for my research dollar).***

Statistically significant results are easy to generate and create the illusion that the research is providing bang for the buck. Unfortunately, statistical significance is not the same thing as real world significance, meaning something of practical importance. Real world significance is a lot harder to identify.

Research that uses statistical significance to identify priorities hides the critical few among the trivial many. This drives management to create a multiplicity of action plans and strategies that address the many things that are of no practical importance to the business. The result is plenty of activity, all of it waste.

What is really important to you and your employees, are the critical few practical priorities that represent the strongest points of leverage for improving the employee/employer relationship. This is

what VoE does, separate the trivial many from the critical few. By doing so, it provides a clear and concise list of actionable priorities that when addressed, will have an impact on the business.

***VoE places a lot of emphasis on the median whereas my previous employee research focused on the mean. Which is the right statistic to use?***

The mean (what most people call the average) should only be used on interval or higher scaled data. Survey research questions, however, are not interval scaled, they are ordinal scaled. Using the mean to interpret survey results is simple statistical incompetence. The median is the proper statistic for ordinal scaled data and has the advantage of providing 'conservative' estimates of central tendency on interval scale data as well – estimates that are not unduly influenced by extremes in the data set.

Converge VoE reports the mean for a data set, but only with the full set of descriptive statistics and only after analysis of the medians has been conducted.

***I like your graphics, they are clean and easy to read, but my previous employee research report included all kinds of fancy 3-D graphics that really seemed to have a glitz factor. Why don't you make your presentations more glitzy?***

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Thanks for liking the graphics we do provide. Graphical and tabular displays of data dominate our reports. What makes VoE different is that all of the graphic formats we use (i.e.; control charts, analytic tables) are graphical data analysis tools designed to support accurate data interpretation and are recognized as such in the statistical community.

Graphics and data tables in VoE support effective presentation of the evidence. This is a transparent approach that enables your people to fully understand the data, helping them make their own interpretations of the information and take accountability for the results.

Yes, there are some fancier graphical representations that provide additional glitz, but that glitz always comes at a cost – corruption of the evidence leading to errors in interpretation. With VoE there is:

- ▲ **no chart-junk**, gratuitous use of content free symbols and ink, i.e.; 3-D displays, cartoonish figures, color without meaning all intended to make things colorful or glitzy at the expense of accurate interpretation.
- ▲ **no junk-charts**, graphical displays of data that improperly present the data leading to misinterpretation, i.e.; pie-charts, bar charts, radar charts.

With VoE, content (by which we mean preservation and proper presentation of the evidence) is king.

*If using statistical significance to determine importance is bad science, why does everyone use it? What makes Converge right and everyone else wrong?*

We wish we could say Converge is right and everyone else is wrong but we can't. If by 'everyone' we mean statisticians and scientists, then there is complete agreement as to the proper interpretation and use of statistical significance and determining importance definitely isn't one of them.

When asked why then, statistical significance is so widely and badly abused, the great American statistician, William Kruskal (of the Kruskal-Wallis Test fame) replied: *"I guess it's a cheap way to get marketable results"*.

Exactly! Statistical significance is used the way it is because it sells. It is equated with a scientific approach, despite the fact that using it to identify areas of practical importance has all the scientific rigor of voodoo. In addition, it produces plenty of significant (albeit trivial) results that give the appearance of providing value.