CDS Consulting Co-op

SOLUTIONS FOR COOPERATIVES

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How We Maintain Anonymity and Confidentiality in CDS Consulting Co-op Employee Surveys

High Participation Rate

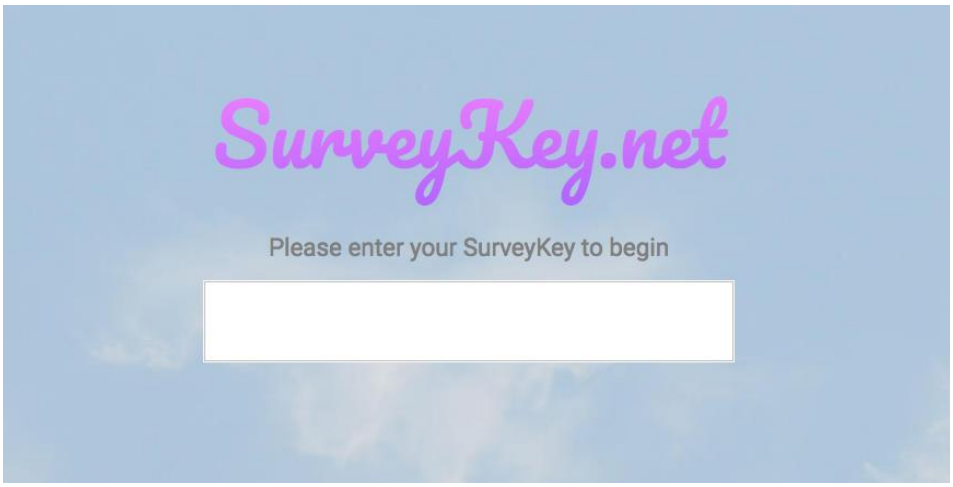
It is very important to get as high a rate of participation as possible. We aim for 95% to 100% of all eligible employees. To allow a lower percentage, say, less than 80%, to take the survey opens up the question of whether the results were skewed favorably or unfavorably. The only way to correct for that would be to randomly select participants. We do that for certain types of surveys but for a full survey, we want everyone to have a voice.

Ensuring Participation and Anonymity Through a System of Key Codes

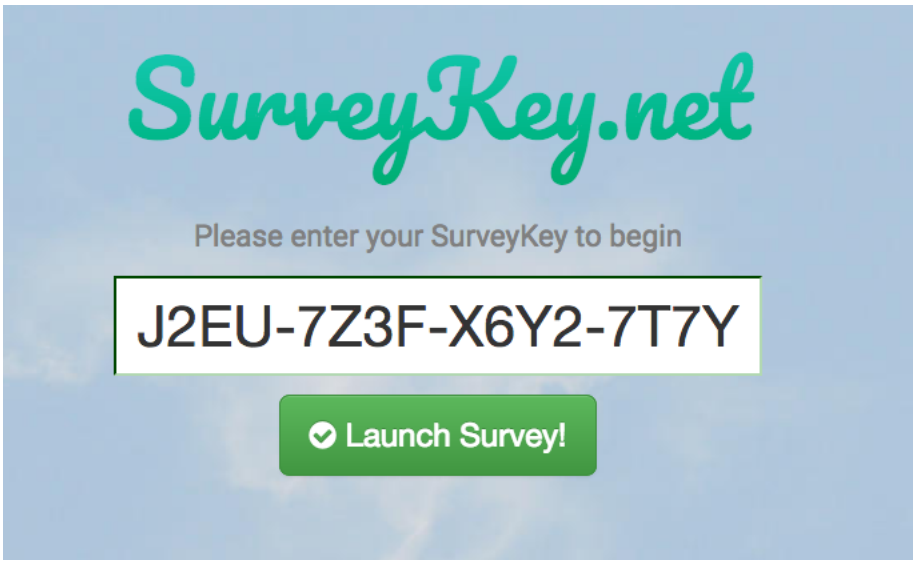
The challenge of getting 100% participation when a survey is taken on line lies is determining who has yet to take the survey and reminding people to do so. How do we know whether someone has taken the survey yet or not without revealing their identity?

When we build the survey on the survey program web site, we issue a set of 16-digit key codes, as many as there are eligible employees. We send the list of key codes to the person on the co-op's staff who is handling survey administration (we'll call that person the "administrator" here) and ask him or her to assign one key code to each eligible employee. We instruct the administrator not to tell us who the key codes are assigned to.

When employees take the survey, they are given a link www.surveykey.net and find this screen:



They enter their key code and the survey opens up for them.



As the survey gets close to completion, we check on line and can see which key codes have not been used yet. This is what the consultant sees:

SurveyKey	First Used	Last Modified	Status
HMLD-R16N-18ED-PUNB			
9GB1-BB2R-U8HD-SU6R			
J2EU-PKWV-JT3P-TNNP	05/01/2017	05/01/2017	Completed
KRU6-Z3FX-PRLN-XLNM	05/01/2017	05/01/2017	Completed
L5EQ-S9WC-1T9T-W8N8	05/01/2017	05/01/2017	Completed
MMTW-7T7Y-JW2C-8ITQ	05/01/2017	05/01/2017	Completed
E285-P6XD-EQGR-2RP4	05/01/2017	05/01/2017	Completed
38J2-27WT-6T2Y-3239	05/01/2017	05/01/2017	Completed
ECKI-BZVU-XL2N-65IA	05/01/2017	05/01/2017	Completed
NNZS-KL8G-K9LE-DRT9	05/01/2017	05/01/2017	Completed

The consultant tells the administrator which key codes have not been used, and the administrator follows up with the people s/he assigned those key codes to, to remind them to take the survey.

The consultant never knows the identity of the people with those key codes, and no one from co-op management including the administrator ever sees any survey responses associated with a key code.

What Co-op Management Sees

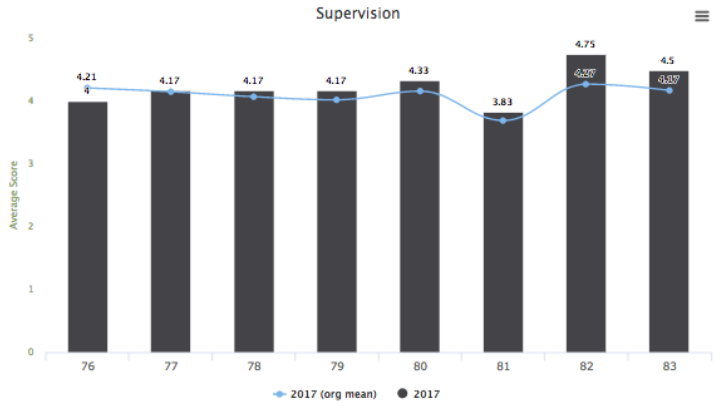
What co-op management sees is how many people chose each possible response to a question--strongly agree, agree, partly agree/disagree, disagree, strongly disagree or No Opinion. There is no information showing how any individual responded to the question. As you can see, those who disagree have plenty of "cover".

8. Co-op management is sincerely interested in the needs and welfare of the employees.		Mean 3.55 Std 1.08
Strongly Agree	5	41 (20.60%)
Agree	4	65 (32.66%)
Partly Agree/Disagree	3	63 (31.66%)
Disagree	2	19 (9.55%)
Strongly Disagree	1	10 (5.03%)
No Opinion		1 (0.50%)

(The numbers 5 through 1 in the middle column represent the numerical value of a response. Strongly agree = 5. Strongly disagree = 1. No Opinion has no value.)

We also sort responses by department and create graphs comparing a department's results with those of the whole staff. Again, there is no way to see anyone's individual response.

Produce



76 My supervisor lets me know what is expected of me.
77 My supervisor's decisions are fair and consistent, even if I don't always agree with them.
78 My supervisor lets me know when I do a good job.
79 I get helpful, timely feedback from my supervisor so that I can improve my performance.
80 My supervisor encourages team members to share their ideas, suggestions and concerns.
81 My supervisor promptly addresses performance problems.
82 My supervisor works well with other managers to support the co-op's Strategic Plan.
83 My supervisor balances the needs of individual staff with the needs of the whole department.

Maintaining Anonymity of Written Comments
At the start of taking the survey on line, employees are given these instructions about the opportunity to write free-form comments:

> At 10 different places in this survey there will be a space to write optional comments. In each comment space, you can write up to 500 characters--about 3 or 4 sentences. The consultant will read all comments but will only include some of them in the survey report, choosing representative examples of the most frequently occurring comments. This means that if your comment is chosen, it's because numerous other staff members made similar comments.

When we do include comments from the survey in our written report to management, we choose only comments whose main message appears multiple times in the survey, comments that are representative of what others seem to be thinking. In other words, we select comments that explain why the scores of the survey turned out the way they did. We also may edit the comments we do select for brevity and clarity.

In conducting a survey there are competing values—maintaining the anonymity of participants vs. sharing every table, graph and comment with everyone who has an interest. When we have to balance these values, we put a priority on anonymity. Without trust in the anonymity of the survey, the value of the data would be compromised. That is one reason why we don't swipe all the comments off the survey website and paste them into a 50 to 70 page Word document in 10-point font and give it to management, let alone the whole staff or the board. If employees knew their comments could be read by anyone, including their own supervisors, they might not write them.

Anonymity vs. Confidentiality
Survey data is anonymous in that the consultant and everyone who sees the survey data do not know the identity of the responders to the survey questions. In the case of interviews, however, the consultant does know the identity of the employee so then the issue becomes confidentiality.

Maintaining Confidentiality: Selection of Interviewees
When we randomly select a sample of survey takers for interviews (depending on the size of the staff, this could range from 5% to 33%), we also choose a group of alternates in case some of the randomly selected people do not wish to be interviewed or won't be available during the interview period. The administrator contacts each person on the randomly selected list and gives her or him the option of declining to be interviewed. If they decline, an alternate is chosen in their place from the alternate list. No one is compelled to participate in an interview.

Maintaining Confidentiality: Instructions to Interviewees
At the start of each interview, we explain that we intend to keep the contents of the interview confidential. We explain that we are looking for themes and patterns, so if the interviewee says something that no one else says (whether in interviews or in the written comments), it won't show up in the report we write to management. On the other hand, if the interviewee says something that other people have said or written, her or his comment is likely to appear in the report, though not necessarily as s/he said it. This seems to satisfy the people we interview.