

# Survey Confidentiality Considerations

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## A Deeper Look at Confidential vs. Anonymous Approaches to Employee Engagement and Experience Surveys

Trust is a critical component of organizational surveys. When there is trust in a program, we can be more confident that the data being collected is honest, accurate, and reliable. A primary consideration in building trust is the perceived confidentiality of survey responses, and one of the first decisions to make is whether the survey will be confidential or anonymous. Although several factors may influence this decision, our best practice recommendation is to conduct confidential surveys. This approach has several advantages and ultimately results in higher quality data and enhanced outcomes for organizations.



There are many decisions that need to be made when conducting a successful organizational survey. One of the most important decisions is whether the data collection approach will be confidential (i.e., attributed) or anonymous (i.e., non-attributed). This decision can have downstream impacts on data quality, the potential for advanced analytics, and employees' trust in the process. Of these, trust is often a primary consideration. Trust is crucial to the on-going success of any survey program and is often bound by the degree of perceived anonymity and confidentiality the survey provides.

In practice, we follow high standards to assure actual and perceived confidentiality of individuals' survey responses, including:

1. Following guidelines for minimum sample sizes for reporting, including all reporting and action planning systems and functionality, as well as executive dialogue and insights,
2. Controlling access to demographic details to a limited number of people in an organization,
3. Developing a well thought out communication plan, and
4. Providing auto-authentication techniques (e.g., single sign-on).

To distinguish between confidential and anonymous surveys, an anonymous or non-attributed survey is one in which employees have the option of self-reporting demographic information during the survey process, whereas

a confidential or attributed survey is one in which the identity of an employee is known to the survey provider and linked to the HRIS database. Choosing one approach or the other—attributed or non-attributed—depends on several factors, including organizational history, culture, quality of the current HRIS database, and the desire for post-survey analytics and historical trends. Overall, attributed surveys are a basic requirement for linkage studies and other advanced analytics. Below are some further advantages and disadvantages to each approach.

### **Anonymous or Non-Attributed Surveys**

Our Definition: Non-attributed surveys are those where no individual identifying information about the participant is precoded through HRIS data systems and the participant has the option to directly share such information on the survey via self-reported demographics. In this approach, individual survey responses cannot be traced back to any one participant.

Our Point of View: Advantages to non-attributed surveys include the employee's reaction to the survey (e.g., feeling more in control of their personal information) and simplicity of the data collection process (e.g., if the HRIS database is not up to date). A primary disadvantage is inaccurate information due to employees miscoding their workgroup membership and other demographics. In addition, non-attributed surveys prevent the ability to link results to individual metrics and

behaviors (e.g., absenteeism, performance, high-potential groups). Overall, the more accurate the information is in the system, the more accurate the final reports will be. With non-attributed surveys, we may be less confident in the data as participants may accidentally (or purposely) select the wrong demographics that best represent them.

One final consideration for truly anonymous surveys is that there is no way to prevent multiple responses from being submitted by the same individual. This is often referred to as ballot-box stuffing. With the absence of linkage between a survey response and an individual respondent, there is no way of knowing how many times a person has submitted, or stacked, their response.

### **Confidential or Attributed Surveys**

Our Definition: For attributed surveys, employee responses are linked to the information provided by an HRIS database,

and this eliminates the need for employees to provide self-reported background information (e.g., job level, department). Typically, with attributed surveys, the identity of the employee is not directly shared with the surveying organization.

Our Point of View: Organizations should be transparent about demographics they are linking to the survey data and ensure no individuals will be exposed. We recommend attributed surveys for several reasons:

1. Demographic questions do not need to be asked on the survey, thus creating shorter surveys,
2. The data will be more accurate versus self-identifying and self-coding demographics,
3. A deeper level of insight from the results via linkage research,
4. An advantage of tracking historical trends from one survey to another, and
5. An individual can only submit one response.

With linkage research, opportunities exist for organizations to link other human capital metrics to survey results. This approach may be as simple as providing specific information about where one is physically located or who they report to and linking to more detailed demographic information (e.g., gender, length of service). It can also link to specific performance data (e.g., performance evaluation scores, high-potential membership, turnover, safety). Linkage research can identify the areas measured in the survey that have the greatest impact on organizational performance.



One Caveat: WSA clients are able to take advantage of Qualtrics' industry-leading experience management software. One of the key features of this platform is that access to raw data can be controlled and limited to certain users. As such, attributed survey approaches cannot be truly anonymous by definition. However, they can still be confidential, as individual managers do not see the responses for members of their teams.

## Summary

In summary, our best practice recommendation is to conduct attributed surveys because of the numerous advantages. In today's environment, employees generally acknowledge that their personal information is captured in multiple systems and platforms, and they are typically less fearful of providing

identifying information so long as steps are taken to protect confidentiality and privacy. It is always important to be transparent with employees about what data is being collected, who has access, and how their data will remain confidential. Year-over-year, demonstrating that individual level data will not be used to retaliate against individuals is one of the best ways to build trust in the process. Regardless of the specific strategy, there is one overall message that, if communicated frequently and consistently, will help drive success of the survey and the organizational development process: *The survey process is aimed at helping the organization take care of its most important asset—its people!* Respecting the spirit of that message will go a long way towards sustaining an effective and lasting program.

### About WSA

We believe in the power of applying the right science to make people and organizations successful. We believe in empowering businesses to measure what matters when it matters—so they, in turn, can motivate their people to work harder, stay longer, and care more. We believe that behavioral science is the ingredient for ensuring that employees stay focused on the right things, at the right time, and with the right momentum. We believe that employees' lives are never better than when they are highly engaged and using their talents to contribute to a company they believe in. And we know that you need a partner who has workforce performance down to a science.