people business
human resources and development consultancy

FROM EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK TO ACTION

A practical guide to pulse surveys for SMEs

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Introduction

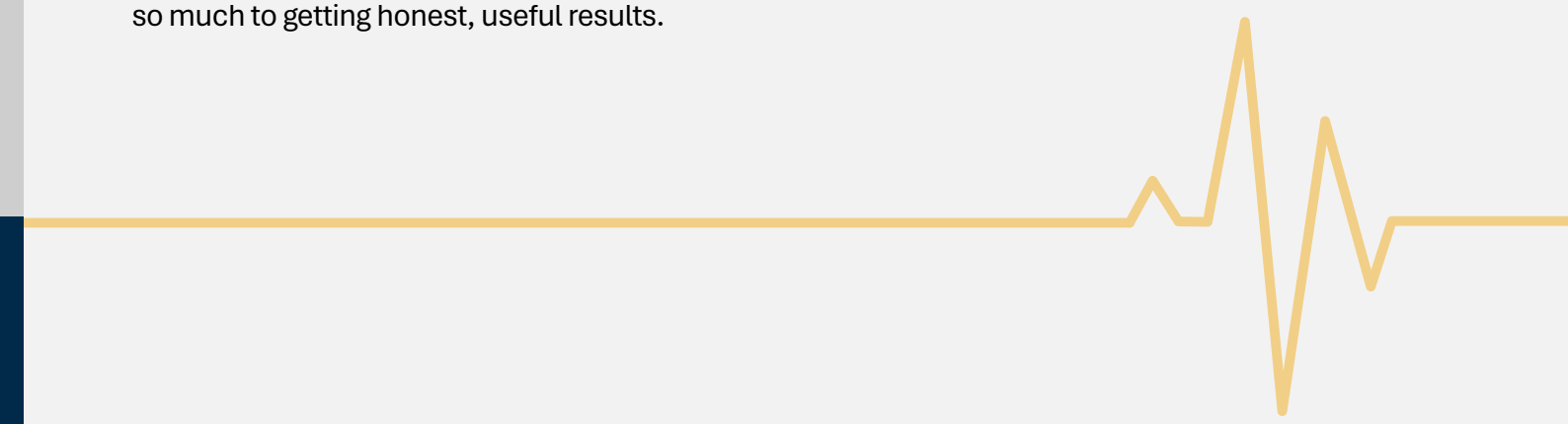
Most organisations want to know how their people are feeling and if they are engaged, but the challenge is knowing how to find out.

You may be hearing that workloads feel heavier, that recent internal changes haven't landed well, or that manager communication is poor. Here it's important to understand whether it's anecdotal or if it's becoming an issue that the business should address.

For SMEs, particularly those without a large HR team, it can be difficult to build an accurate picture without embarking on a major employee engagement survey.

This is why organisations are increasingly turning to pulse surveys to keep a more regular check on the 'temperature' and 'pulse' of employee sentiment in between larger, more formal engagement exercises.

This guide has been designed to help SME leaders and HR teams understand what pulse surveys are, how they differ from longer engagement surveys, and when each is the right tool. It covers the typical format and topics, the benefits pulse surveys offer, and why confidentiality and independence matter so much to getting honest, useful results.



What is a pulse survey?

A pulse survey is a short, focused set of questions sent to employees at regular intervals, often monthly or quarterly. It is designed to capture how people are feeling at a particular point in time, on a small number of specific topics, rather than attempting to measure everything at once.

Unlike an annual engagement survey, a pulse survey isn't trying to build a complete picture of an organisational culture in one go.

It's a quick temperature check: a snapshot of a particular point in time, on a particular set of issues, that can be repeated often enough to spot trends, flag emerging concerns and measure the impact of changes as they happen.

Used well, a pulse survey programme becomes part of a wider culture of continuous listening. It's not a once-a-year event, but a regular, managed way of understanding how your people are really doing.

When could a pulse survey help?

Pulse surveys are particularly useful when there is something specific you want to understand. Here are some typical situations.

1. You have recently introduced a significant change

Perhaps you have restructured, changed working arrangements, introduced a new system or made changes to roles and responsibilities.
You may want to understand:

- Do employees understand why the change was made?
- How confident are employees about the change?
- Do they know what it means for them?
- Are managers communicating consistently?

What might you do with the results?

If employees broadly support the change but do not understand the reasons behind it, the answer may not be to rethink the change itself. You might instead improve manager briefings, hold additional employee sessions or provide clearer information.

Repeating some of the same questions several weeks later then allows you to see whether those actions have made a difference.

2. You are concerned about workload, wellbeing or retention

Perhaps absence has increased, employees appear under pressure or you are seeing more people leave than usual. Rather than making assumptions about the cause, a short survey could explore questions around workload, management support, recognition and wellbeing.

What might you do with the results?

The feedback might highlight a particular team where workload is consistently difficult to manage. It could indicate that employees feel supported by their immediate manager but unclear about wider business priorities.

The response can then be focused on the actual issue, whether that means reviewing resources, improving communication, supporting managers or investigating one area in more depth.

3. The business is growing quickly

Growth can be positive, but it can also put pressure on communication, management capability and culture. People who once had regular access to senior leaders may feel less connected. New managers may be taking on people responsibility for the first time. Different parts of the organisation may begin having very different employee experiences.

What might you do with the results?

A pulse survey could identify whether communication is keeping pace with growth, whether employees feel clear about priorities and whether managers have the support they need. This could lead to more regular leadership communication, clearer management expectations or targeted manager development.

The key is that the survey gives you evidence about where to focus rather than relying entirely on anecdotal feedback.

How pulse surveys support employee engagement

Running a survey does not, in itself, improve employee engagement. You'll find that employees can become less engaged with surveys if they're regularly asked for their views but never see anything happen or change as a result.

The real value comes from creating a simple cycle of listening and action.



A pulse survey gives employees a regular voice and helps leaders understand what is changing. The organisation then needs to make sense of what it has heard, decide what action is appropriate and communicate this back to employees.

Sometimes that action may be significant. At other times it may simply involve explaining why something cannot change or providing more information. What matters is that employees can see that their feedback has been considered.

Over time, this creates a more useful dialogue between employees and the organisation rather than an occasional survey exercise.

Pulse surveys versus engagement surveys

Pulse surveys and employee engagement surveys are closely related, but they perform different roles.

	Pulse Surveys	Engagement Surveys
Pupose	A quick, regular temperature check on a small number of specific topics.	A comprehensive, in-depth assessment of the full employee experience.
Frequency	Typically monthly or quarterly (can be weekly).	Typically annually or every 18-24 months.
Focus	• Current mood and sentiment • Reaction to a recent change or announcement • A specific theme, e.g. workload, management or communication • Trend data, tracked over time	• Overall engagement and motivation • Alignment with organisational values and strategy • Detailed diagnostics across many dimensions: leadership, reward, development, wellbeing • Benchmarking against sector or historical data
Overall	Lightweight and frequent. They're not designed to replace a full engagement review, but they keep leaders informed and enable issues to be caught early.	Deeper, whole-picture view. They take longer to design, complete and analyse, but provide the depth needed for strategic, longer-term decision-making.

Anatomy of a pulse survey

Typical length

Usually just 5-10 questions, taking employees no more than a few minutes to complete. Keeping it short is deliberate. It protects response rates and makes frequent repetition realistic.

Frequency

Sent weekly, monthly or quarterly, depending on what is being tracked and the pace of change in the organisation. A business going through significant change may 'pulse' more often; a stable organisation may 'pulse' quarterly to maintain a steady baseline.

Format

Mostly closed questions using rating scales for example 1-5, or agree/disagree. An optional open comment box can provide useful context. Many pulse surveys rotate a small core set of questions each time, to track trends consistently, alongside one or two questions on a topical or seasonal issue.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Pulse surveys are usually anonymous or confidential, particularly in smaller teams, to encourage honest responses. How this is managed, and by whom, has a significant bearing on how much people trust the process. This is particularly important in SMEs, where employees may worry that their comments could be identifiable even when names are not collected.



Because pulse surveys are short and focused on one or two themes at a time, response rates tend to stay high, and survey fatigue is less of a risk than with longer questionnaires issued too frequently.

What can a pulse survey help you understand?

Because a pulse survey is a snapshot of a specific point in time, rather than a once-a-year exercise, it allows you to:

- spot issues early, before they become embedded or widespread
- track sentiment over time and see whether trends are moving in the right direction
- measure the impact of a specific change such as a new policy, a restructure, a return-to-office decision, shortly after it happens
- make focused, timely adjustments, rather than waiting months for a full survey cycle to confirm a problem
- test the temperature before or after a significant announcement
- give employees a regular voice, reinforcing that feedback is welcomed continuously, not just once a year

Because each survey is small and quick to turn around, action can follow feedback within weeks rather than months, while the issue is still current and fixable.

Think of a pulse survey as a health check, not a full diagnosis.

It tells you where you may need to look further, not necessarily why something is happening.



What should you ask in a pulse survey?

Most pulse surveys draw their questions from a small set of recurring themes. Below are the topics we most often see used well, together with example statements for each.

Theme	Organisation's objective	Example statements
Wellbeing	To understand more about the team's work life balance, and if they are getting sufficient support.	*"I feel able to manage my workload effectively at the moment."* *"My manager checks in with me regularly about how I'm doing."*
Communication	To test whether the team feels informed and heard	*"I feel well informed about what's happening in the business."* *"I know where to raise a concern or suggestion."*
Management and leadership	To assess confidence in immediate managers and senior leadership.	*"My manager gives me useful, regular feedback."* *"I have confidence in the decisions made by senior leadership."*
Change and specific initiatives	To measure reaction to a recent or upcoming change	*"I understand the reasons behind [the recent change]."* *"I feel the new [process/policy] is working well so far."*
Recognition and reward	To check whether people feel recognised and valued for their contribution.	*"I feel recognised for the work I do."* *"I believe my pay and benefits are fair for my role."*
Overall sentiment	A consistent benchmark question, repeated every time to track direction of travel.	*"Overall, I would recommend [organisation] as a good place to work."*

A well-designed pulse survey doesn't cover every topic every time. Most organisations rotate two or three themes per survey, alongside one or two consistent benchmark questions repeated every cycle so that trends can be tracked reliably.

From feedback to action

An important stage of any pulse survey begins when the responses come back.

The results should help you decide where to look more closely and where action is needed.

Start by asking:

- Are there strong themes across the organisation?
- Are particular teams or employee groups responding differently?
- Has sentiment changed since the previous survey?
- Are there areas where scores and written comments appear to tell different stories?
- Is there anything that needs immediate attention?
- Which issues require more investigation before action is taken?

Try to avoid reacting to every individual comment as though it represents the whole workforce. The purpose is to identify meaningful themes and patterns.

From there, agree a small number of priorities. A long action plan containing twenty different initiatives is unlikely to be helpful. It is often better to focus on two or three things that would make a noticeable difference.

Tell employees what you heard

Closing the feedback loop is essential. Employees don't need a lengthy presentation or access to every piece of survey data, but they should receive a clear summary of what the organisation heard.

A simple approach is:

You said: the main themes employees raised.
We are doing: the action the organisation will take.
We are looking into: issues that require further investigation.
We can't change this at the moment because: where appropriate, an honest explanation.

This last point is important.

Listening to employees does not mean agreeing to every request. People are generally more likely to accept that something cannot change when they know their feedback has been heard and the reasons have been explained.



What are the benefits of pulse surveys?

- **Real-time insight:** Frequent snapshots mean you don't have to wait a year to know how people feel.
- **Higher response rates:** Short, simple surveys are quicker to complete and less likely to be ignored.
- **Tracking trends:** Repeated questions build a picture over time, showing direction of travel rather than a single score.
- **Agility:** Issues can be identified and addressed while they are still small and manageable.
- **Demonstrates listening:** Regular surveys signal that employee voice matters continuously, not just annually.
- **Cost-effective:** Typically quicker and cheaper to design, distribute and analyse than a full engagement survey.
- **Evidence for HR and leadership decisions:** Pulse survey results can provide useful evidence when discussing people issues with the wider leadership team.

What can go wrong with pulse surveys?

Pulse surveys are useful but they have limitations. Be aware of:

- **Limited depth:** A handful of questions can't capture the full complexity of the employee experience.
- **Risk of survey fatigue:** Too frequent, or too many surveys, can reduce participation and honesty.
- **Lack of follow-up:** If results aren't acted on and communicated back, trust in the process quickly erodes.
- **Not a replacement for deeper diagnostics:** For structural or strategic issues, a fuller survey and analysis is usually needed.
- **Poorly worded questions can lead to misleading results:** Questions need to be clear, neutral and focused. You don’t want a question to lead employees towards a particular answer as the data will be less useful.

When a longer engagement survey is the better choice

While pulse surveys are an excellent tool for frequent, focused feedback, there are times when a fuller, more detailed engagement survey is the right approach.

For example:

- when you need a comprehensive baseline before a major strategic or cultural change programme
- when you want to benchmark in detail against other organisations, or against your own previous years
- when you need to understand root causes across multiple, interconnected themes, such as how reward, development and leadership interact
- when you're planning a significant investment in your people strategy and need robust data to inform it
- as part of a wider annual or biennial governance and reporting cycle

In practice, most SMEs benefit from a rhythm that combines both approaches: an annual or biennial engagement survey to build the full picture, with pulse surveys running in between to keep a regular check on sentiment and to measure the impact of any actions taken.

Protect confidentiality and trust: an independent perspective

The value of any survey depends entirely on how honestly people respond. Employees need to feel confident that their answers are genuinely confidential, and that giving honest feedback will not come back to affect them.

For SMEs in particular, where teams are small and everyone often knows everyone, protecting genuine confidentiality can be difficult to do credibly in-house. This needs to be considered when designing the survey, analysing open comments and deciding how results are reported.

An experienced, trusted external HR consultant gives employees the confidence to speak honestly, and gives leaders confidence that what they're hearing is a true reflection of how their people feel.

They can provide:

- **Genuine confidentiality:** Responses go to a trusted third party, not directly to line managers or senior leaders. This reduces the fear of individual comments being traced back to a person - especially important in smaller teams, where anonymity can otherwise be difficult to protect.
- **Independence and objectivity:** An external consultant has no vested interest in a particular outcome and can present results - good and bad - without internal politics getting in the way.
- **Experience in framing the right questions:** A consultant who has designed surveys across many organisations knows how to word questions to avoid bias, and which topics are worth tracking for your sector and stage of growth.
- **Skilled, credible analysis:** An experienced HR consultant can interpret trends and results and translate them into clear, actionable themes for leadership, rather than offering up a spreadsheet of numbers.
- **Trusted delivery of difficult messages:** Where results raise sensitive or challenging issues, an external, trusted voice can present findings constructively and help leadership respond well.
- **Time saved:** Designing, distributing, analysing and reporting on a survey takes time and expertise that many SME leaders and HR teams have in limited supply.

Getting the most from your pulse survey programme

A few simple habits make the difference between a pulse survey programme that builds trust, and one that quietly loses credibility:

- **Keep it short:** Five to ten questions, around 5 minutes, every time.
- **Know why you're asking:** Every survey should have a clear purpose.
- **Be consistent:** Repeat a small core set of questions so you can track trends reliably over time.
- **Don't over-survey:** Space pulse surveys sensibly and avoid running multiple surveys at once.
- **Look for patterns, not individual comments:** One particularly positive or negative comment should not automatically drive your response.
- **Act on what you hear:** Focus on a manageable number of meaningful actions - builds trust.
- **Communicate results:** Share headline results with employees, not just with leadership, and explain "what we heard and what we're doing"
- **Measure again:** Where action has been taken, use future pulse surveys to understand whether it has made a difference.
- **Combine with a fuller survey:** Use pulse surveys between annual or biennial engagement surveys, not instead of them.

A practical pulse survey checklist

Before launching a survey, ask:

- ☑ What do we actually want to understand?
- ☑ Why do we need this information now?
- ☑ Is a short pulse survey the right tool, or do we need a wider engagement exercise?
- ☑ Which questions do we need to repeat so we can track trends?
- ☑ How will we protect employee confidentiality?
- ☑ Who will analyse the responses?
- ☑ How will we decide what requires action?
- ☑ How and when will we communicate the results to employees?
- ☑ When will we review whether our actions have made a difference?

If you cannot answer the questions about action and communication before the survey is launched, it may be worth resolving those first.

Case study: pulse surveys in practice

The situation

Blueprint for All is a UK charity with a team of around 35 employees. The organisation wanted to take a 'temperature check' of how people were feeling about different aspects of working there. There were no particular concerns driving the exercise. The aim was to understand what was working well, where improvements could be made and where action would have the greatest impact.

What we wanted to understand

Rather than trying to cover everything in one large employee survey, Blueprint for All identified four areas where more focused feedback would be useful: induction and onboarding, training and development, reward and recognition, and system processes and resources.

The approach

People Business worked with Blueprint for All to create a programme of four pulse surveys, each focusing on one of these themes and running at different points throughout the year.

The surveys combined quantitative questions, which provided measurable data, with qualitative questions that gave employees the opportunity to explain their experiences in more detail. Demographic information, including team and length of service, was also collected so that patterns could be identified across the organisation.

What we learned

The surveys gave Blueprint for All a more detailed picture of the employee experience than it had previously been able to capture. The results highlighted both strengths and areas for improvement and helped the organisation identify some quick wins as well as issues that would take longer to address.

The feedback also gave managers a clearer picture of employees' day-to-day experiences, rather than leaving them to make assumptions about what was working well or where problems might lie.

What happened next

The findings were used to decide what action to take. For each survey, one or two managers took responsibility for reviewing the feedback and suggesting possible actions. These were narrowed down to five to ten priorities and discussed by the management team to agree what should be taken forward.

A lead manager was then responsible for keeping the agreed actions moving. This meant there was someone clearly responsible for following up on the feedback rather than the survey results simply being filed away.

The outcome

The pulse survey programme has helped managers build a better understanding of staff experience and act on what they are hearing. Managers have reported more shared responsibility for addressing issues, while the management team is working more closely together and meeting more regularly to review progress and deal with any barriers.

For Blueprint for All, the surveys provided useful, focused feedback that could be turned into practical action. Just as importantly, there was a clear process for deciding what to do next and making sure those actions happened.

Building a better rhythm of employee listening

Pulse surveys do not replace regular conversations between managers and their teams, and they should not sit in isolation from a wider approach to employee engagement. What they can do is provide another useful source of information about how people are feeling and what may be changing.

For SMEs, they are a relatively simple way to spot concerns earlier, track changes over time and see whether actions taken are actually making a difference.

The aim is not simply to gather more feedback. It is to create a regular cycle of listening, understanding what employees are saying and then doing something with that information.

Used in this way, pulse surveys can become a valuable part of how an organisation understands and improves the employee experience.

The aim is not simply to gather more feedback. It is to create a regular cycle of listening, understanding and action

About People Business

At People Business, we've spent 25+ years helping organisations build stronger, more engaged teams. We design and deliver pulse and engagement surveys, and follow through with the analysis, action planning and practical HR advisory. We also provide leadership development support that help our clients act on what they hear.

We work as an external, independent partner, giving employees the confidence to speak honestly, and giving leaders confidence that what they're hearing is a true reflection of how their people feel.

Get in touch if you'd like help designing a pulse survey programme for your organisation, or want a second opinion on your existing engagement approach. We'd love to hear from you.

We are here to help you with your day-to-day HR challenges, and your one-off projects.

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