Tech lends an ear to the workplace

By Nick Easen for CNN

(CNN) --More and more bosses are turning to Web-based surveys to listen to their workers -- whether it's a complaint about management or new ideas on a staff canteen.

Electronic human resources or "eHR" is turning out to be the latest way technology-driven executives can keep a finger on their business' pulse.

At a fraction of the cost of traditional HR, large car manufacturers, hotels and financial services are leading the way in asking staff to log-on and speak out.

"Employees have a lot to say, and if you build trust into the reporting process, they will tell you what's going on -- the good, bad, and ugly," Theresa Welbourne, of survey software company eePulse Inc, told CNN.

"You cannot effectively run a business without understanding the employee experience," adds Welbourne.

Whether workers want flexibility more than higher pay, whether rising health-care costs are more of a concern than the abolished bonus program, these days feedback comes via the Web rather than meetings with HR people or paper-based surveys.

And Web-based analyses can mean big savings especially for global or regional companies keen on retaining and understanding their widely dispersed work forces.

"They are becoming much more common, online surveys are very efficient and cost effective," Dean Luker, with market researchers Synovate Ltd., told CNN.

"Employees can be surveyed more regularly and in greater depth than they can be if the survey is on paper," says Luker.

As long as an employee has access to a computer and the Web, they can give feedback. But even if they don't, some companies have come up with ingenious ways to let their employees have their say.

"One company I know of in the United Kingdom set up a bus with a satellite dish on top to deliver

broadband Internet access. Employees went into the bus and logged on to a terminal at lunch time," adds Luker.

The U.S. was the first country to use online surveys. Yet the trend has now spread to Europe, with the rest of the world catching up fast. Luker adds that in the Netherlands, Internet-based research is basically the only way many businesses can now operate.

And it's not dependent on household penetration of the Internet either, since people fill in surveys at work.

The working environment, job satisfaction and what employees think of their bosses, as well as their levels of loyalty and company commitment are all hot topics.

Although trust is an issue, many employees feel quite flattered that they are asked for feedback.

And the fact that a third party is involved in collecting the data means that staff feel able to voice their opinion openly, and an external consultant acts as a point of separation between the company and anonymous staff responses.

As the technology advances, so does the methodology and speed of feedback.

Staff thoughts and feelings are now being sought before business ideas are implemented, and multimedia visuals can be used to offer staff different designs for office and work environments.

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