



WORKWISE® by Mildred L. Culp

Employee confidences about productivity

June 1, 2003

By Mildred L. Culp

Do you *really* know what employees in your company are thinking about their work?

For six years, Theresa Welbourne, president and CEO of eePulse Inc., an application service provider in Ann Arbor, Mich., has been collecting data every week from what have become hundreds of thousands of employees worldwide. They work in companies ranging from fewer than 100 employees to more than 300,000 employees in industries as diverse as manufacturing, financial services and high technology. Respondents come from all levels in their organizations, from contract or temporary employees to CEOs.



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"We ask employees to rate the degree to which they are energized or not energized by their work," Welbourne says, "and to comment about what energizes them and what gets in the way of their work." Problems they address center upon obstacles to productivity.

"Most people are raising sincere business issues," she states. "They're not whiny. They very rarely complain about their managers, about their pay, or about the big things." Does this mean that higher performers, at least, are happy?

SMALL STUFF

"In most cases," Welbourne notes, "employees are begging management to get the obstacles out of their way so they can be productive." For example, the survey recorded a complaint that cafeteria prices are excessive and food quality lacking, leading to a possible mutiny in the form of a lunchroom boycott. Another person moans that sack-lunches-to-go are missing. Yet another notes that restrooms chronically need soap.

There are numerous computer issues, many wasting tremendous time and labor. One person responds that three business days evaporated during an attempt to resolve computer-related problems. For almost two months, another person waited on a printer. Everything looked fine in another case when a new laptop arrived, until the techie couldn't install the software. E-mail causes frustration because of chronic problems throughout the work day, which make it an unreliable tool, losing messages and server access. One employee said it all: "Computer issues drive me crazy."

Parking and safety issues cause major to minor inconvenience. At one organization, employees braved packed snow and ice for four days before salt was used. Elsewhere, speed bumps and cameras haven't been installed after they were discussed a year ago. People abuse spaces marked for the handicapped; vandals case cars in the garage; employees speed off the property; desk items disappear. Comments reflect disagreement over who is to assume responsibility for the safety of people and their property.

Problems with teamwork range from occasional monotony or inadequate training to the strain non-performers cause on the remaining team members. In particular, one person comments, "We should be able to rely on each other to pull equal weight."

NOT SO SMALL

There are lots of complaints about communication, such as:

- "Better communication is needed (a recurring remark).
- "Need more communication about changes that are going on in the company; we see the changes but we don't hear about them.
- "Need ... more concern about the employees, and their personal problems at work.
- "We don't know if we will have jobs come the end of the month! We NEED more input about job stability!
- "Communicate in more detail the short term plans and long term plans. We need to rebuild morale to support long-range planning.
- "Supervisors/managers should be more willing to listen to or help out employees when they have problems.
- "I think if the workplace were more positive ... it would be a better workplace to come to."

SATISFACTION

Findings suggest that employees are at least somewhat satisfied on the job. Some report that they receive recognition from their bosses, while one proposes an occasional pizza out of the building to enhance morale during fiscal strain. One mentions that the work environment "feels much healthier" because of increased communication. Another reports that morale will lift. A third remarks that he's better organized because of increased communication. "We have a good team; we work together and get our job done," another writes. At least one team is getting results. "Everything is falling into place," one employee comments.

"Employees want voice," Welbourne observes. "Weekly feedback might seem too much, but it's not." She maintains that trust builds as employees learn that they are rewarded for speaking up. She concedes that employers fear that increased communication only increases complaints. That does happen, but the roadblocks to productivity are removed. Now, all we need is a workplace in which employees say these things directly to their bosses, in or out of meetings — and keep their jobs.