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## E-Pulse

(Editor's Note: Dr. Welbourne is the founder of E-Pulse as well as its President and CEO. She is an adjunct professor in the Executive Education Group at the University of Michigan's Law School of Business. She also is the Editor-in-Chief of Human Resource Management Journal.)

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**MD: Talk to me a little bit about E-Pulse and what this organization does.**

**Dr. Welbourne:** We are a technology and management resource company, so we deliver proprietary technology that is involved in creating feedback systems and collecting data from employees and customers. The difference is that we do it frequently, so we collect data weekly from employees using very short pulse surveys. We ask open-ended comment questions. Rather than just a survey process, we have built a technology that focuses on what you do with the data when you get it. On the research side, we take all of the data across different clients and organizations and track trends and other kinds of

business, loading all the information into our software program.

**MD: We seem to be awash in the results of survey data. Specifically and practically what do some your customers do with the information you provide them?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** I have always gotten some very specific results from the data. We are less likely to do the traditional once-a-year surveys that most people are doing. We place a lot of emphasis on what questions to ask. We reach out to the employees, thinking of them as reporters for the organization, so we ask them weekly, "What do you see? What does company experience look like?" We ask them less about them as people and more about what knowledge the employees have. Then we grab that information and give it to all the managers and the companies, and we are seeing positive results. One client said in just over a month they saved a million dollars because they made some changes based on the data, pretty large-scale reductions in turnover with the data. We have worked with hospitals, and we can show that patient satisfaction is up. But, it is not just getting the data; it's getting the data to the managers and making sure that the information is targeted on what they are going to be able to do this week to improve performance. You might even think about it as a very good high quality execution tool. You know what your strategy is, but you might not be sure this week how to get there. What we are able to do is grab the information, organize it to map out the specific things that need to be done, and identify what barriers to productivity exist so you can knock them down and start moving forward.

**MD: So you have similar clients who are polling their employees and their customers on a weekly basis?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** We do. What happens is that as the rate of change goes up the frequency goes up, so we have people who use it weekly, some use it bi-weekly, and some monthly, but that is the timeframe we work in. We really don't do annual surveys.

**MD: Do you ever get any level of negative responses from people who feel they are polled too often?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** We actually see the opposite because employees perceive it as an intervention. Let me give you an example: We put the survey out on Thursday. It takes up to two minutes at most to fill it out. We go through scientific metrics based on my research and the open-ended comment questions, and then we post them live on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, maybe Monday morning. Then we close it, and

we have 900 maybe 1000, 3000 managers who get their own customized reports on Monday evening. So what happens is that feedback is turned around so quickly, the employees see that their voice is being heard. We have also built technology, since we can never guarantee that every manager is going to read the data and do something with it. So every single employee who takes the survey gets their own personal report every week, and we are giving them some customized feedback so they can learn from themselves too. Again, we have been able to change it from a traditional survey process to a communication feedback process, and people want to have voice. They want to be heard.

**MD: I think that is a really good point that your approach to this is making a communication tool and not just trying to do the end-of-the-year report—"Well, let's see what everybody thinks about how we did last year."**

**Dr. Welbourne:** It has been very interesting. We have been in business data for eight years, and it has been pretty radical. We get groups of managers that come into our company and want to work with us. They are just so frustrated with the traditional approaches to employee surveys. They want the information from employees, but they don't want to have to be accountable for this once a year, and if they do issue a survey once a year, they get the data back too late to make a difference. So we tend to be the place people come to when they want to transform surveys into leadership tools.

**MD: How did you come up with this idea of taking surveys more frequently?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** I was in academics doing research studies that looked just like annual surveys, and I started working with a number of different CEO's from different companies. They basically said to me, "We love your research. We love what you are doing, but they way you do it is awful." They wouldn't let me work with them unless I came up with something different. I happened to be doing research on energy at work, and I learned that energy fluctuates a lot, so I came up with this idea, only after the CEO's pushed me there, of collecting data more frequently, and it worked out. Left to my own devices as an academic I would have just continued doing 200 question surveys. It is easier.

**MD: Yes?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** Yes.

**MD: How many readership surveys have you done, and who would be the usership of this kind of survey?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** I actually started this about two years ago. Since I still have a role in the academic world, I wanted to continue my research and use what we were doing in business for a research prospective. We initially started out doing the study with the University of Michigan, Executive Education Alumni. The idea was to get some information about their experiences and do it on a frequent basis so we could learn from them, share the information, and learn from each other. For me it was about connecting people to each other, because I knew with the technology I could grab the data and give the results back quickly. Over the last two years the sampling has gotten bigger. We have numerous leaders who opted in, and right now we have a sample of a little over 4,000 leaders. It is a global sample although most are in the US right now. We go out every other month with about five to seven questions in a survey. The way it works is we give short surveys, ask a lot of open-ended comment questions, and invite the people in the survey to suggest questions that are of interest to them. We then grab the data, analyze it, and everybody in the sample gets the results right away. I don't ask those questions every time because if I keep asking the same questions they are going to get mad at me. So I ask the questions and in six months I will ask them again and change the confidence question. Then on the off surveys we ask other topics. For example, last time around we did a survey on what is getting in the way of executing your strategy, and we vary the subjects in between.

**MD: Okay, I am just curious. Looking at the report you sent me, almost everything is in a downward trend.**

**Dr. Welbourne:** I was frankly a little surprised by that. The last survey that we did was down too, but this one was really down. The data shows that confidence is down also.

**MD: There are a couple really noticeable downtrends in the confidence of the HR Departments and executive teams' abilities. Is this a question that you ask very often? Have you seen this as a continually downward type of survey result?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** I added the HR confidence metric last year, so I don't have multi-year data with this, but I do have some open-ended comment data that goes with this to give us some sense of why?

**MD: Okay, can you share that?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** Yes, one of the things that we have been seeing both in the large leadership sample and within some of our client data is that people are on the verge of absolutely burning out. The comments I get from people are, "We've laid off. We're down to the bare minimum. We are not hiring yet. I have 20 different projects, my boss just added three more, and I don't have any idea how to spend my time because every single one of those is important." So, I talk about people stacking work rather than prioritizing work. It just seems to be a growing phenomenon. Now you take that and add to that scenario the fact that the news media is saying the economy is getting better. These managers are scared to death they are going to lose some of their best people. It is like the straw that breaks the camel's back, because if somebody leaves, they just don't know what to do because they're so overworked, they have so much stuff going on, there is no slack in the system, and I think that is why they are so worried about the human resource factor.

**MD: That is interesting and very accurate. In some of the other information and stories that we are hearing, the responses from people include, "We are right in the midst right now between recovering and not recovering, and I think we are getting the worse of both ends."**

**Dr. Welbourne:** That is what we are seeing. I tell my intervention people, "Sit down once a week with your manager and go through what you are working on. Then agree on what is the most important way to spend your time." The other issue is that when people have so much work to do, and they are not clear what the priorities are, they don't feel successful. So you have a bunch of people who are overworked, don't feel successful, and are not spending their time on the right things, and yeah, if they have a job offer somewhere else they are going to want to leave because it just doesn't feel good to be here.

**MD: Others that catch my eye are: "Employees don't have confidence in their firm's ability to change" and "Employees don't have confidence in their firm's ability to execute the company's vision." I think those would be very problematic results for some managers, decisions makers who are seeing this data.**

**Dr. Welbourne:** When I combine that with the survey I ran last time in this group (which was: "What is getting in the way of execution of your strategy?"), one of the number one barriers was themselves, their habits, their past, and their culture, so they are having a really hard time breaking out. That's why they are overworked. They don't have money, which is stressing them, and what's amazing is that I see it in all companies, big companies, small companies--it is happening in all the different industries we are studying. One of the quotes I remembered from some of the comments from a C- level executive is: "We are on our 5<sup>th</sup> strategy. The last 4 didn't work, why should this one?" That is the other thing. I think we have an interesting phenomenon where leaders who are people that used to be really successful and felt good about the results are feeling beat up, so what I worry about is that if the very top leadership isn't doing well, they are sending these messages to the employees. I have research that shows energy at the senior level predicts energy for the rest of the employees. So, if HR doesn't get in there and help with leadership teamwork, we are in big trouble.

**MD: Usually in surveys there is pretty clear information on which way to go or which way the barriers are, but in looking at this information on "Key factors to influence their confidence in their ability to grow," it is as if there is nothing to focus on.**

**Dr. Welbourne:** Some of the to-dos having to do with that would come more from my client data as an example. What's happening is that people need some successes to break through where they are right now, and when we work with companies, we ask them, "What can we do this week to increase sales?" I get really tactical and try to have them identify three things to act on. These things might be very small and might seem minimal, but if you can act on them and see a little success, then you communicate that back to the employee population, and it starts getting rid of the negative energy and starts building some positive energy. We have seen things as small as fixing the copier that had been broken for the last eight months. When you listen to employees and take care of something that is stressing and bothering them, such as a broken copier, it shows that you are responding to them and helps boost their morale.

**MD: Sometimes we overlook the small things that are such irritants in everybody's life at work, and we forget that taking care of them can make a difference.**

**Dr. Welbourne:** Right, and we see them making a big difference. We have data showing this, so if it's a question of hiring some expensive consultant to come up with a new strategy vs. fixing the things that are getting in the way of productivity, I would say fix the things getting in the way of productivity.

**MD: That's an excellent point. The frustration of a copier that continually jams is just the last straw sometimes.**

**Dr. Welbourne:** Yes it is, and we have heard from people who are working in call centers, and they get complaints that the phones don't work. That could be a problem.

**MD: Otherwise you are not a call center for very long. If people are going to get this kind of information on an ongoing, regular basis, how do they best use it and not simply have it stack up on the desk?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** The right questions have to be asked in the surveys. I know there is a downward trend in confidence in energy, but what I need to do is ask questions that go with it. "What can I do today to improve performance?" That is where we see the win.

**MD: Can you share at least some of the clients that utilize this approach of fairly often surveying their customers and employees? If it is a privacy issue I understand, but I always like to give our readers an idea who are the type of organizations that are involved in something like this.**

**Dr. Welbourne:** Some of our customers include General Motors (and we have worked with them for quite awhile just in groups in GM), British Telecom, and Washington Mutual Bank, some published work.

**MD: You mentioned the medical industry, hospitals?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** We worked with Northwestern Memorial Hospital out of Chicago, we are not active right now, but we did work with them for about two years.

**MD: Are you seeing small organizations or more public sector groups involved in this yet?**

**Dr. Welbourne:** Yes, we actually started out with small companies, because they were a little bit more willing to take the risks and they are going through a lot of change. I just don't know whose name I can tell divulge right now.

**MD: I understand.**

**Dr. Welbourne:** Small companies in California, the East Coast, and in the Michigan Midwest area, too.

**MD: Well, it's good that our readers know that there are small companies that are doing something.**

**Dr. Welbourne:** We are working with some consultants who are using it with small groups of 20 people. What's interesting is that people are more willing to say certain things when they know the data is anonymous and confidential. The other issue is the ability to synthesize and trend the data because we automatically categorize all of our comments. The comment data also gets trended, so that is very different than going out and talking to people. It doesn't replace the ability to talk to people, but it allows you to see the data a little differently, and I am talking about looking at a weather map of your company and seeing where the storm is coming in.

**MD: That is a very good analogy. Thank you for your thoughts and insights.**

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### About the author...



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Dr. Welbourne is Adjunct Professor of Executive Education at the Ross School of Business at the Ross School of Business, the University of Michigan. Prior to her adjunct work with Michigan, she was a full-time professor at the University of Michigan and at Cornell University.

She is the founder, President, and CEO of eePulse, Inc., a technology and management research company delivering web-based leadership tools that transform real-time business information from employees into real-time results for organizations.

Dr. Welbourne's expertise is in the area of strategic HRM and HR leadership in high growth and high change organizations. With over 25 years in the HR field, her particular focus is on understanding how various human resource, communication, and leadership strategies can harness employee and customer energy to improve firm performance.

Professor Welbourne received her Ph.D. from the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research has been featured in popular publications such as *Inc. Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Financial Times*, *Business Week*, *The New York Times*, and *Entrepreneur Magazine*. Her work has been published in several books and in journals such as the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Management*, *Human Resource Planning*, *Journal of Organization Behavior*, *Compensation and Benefits Review*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, and *Journal of High Technology Management Research*. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *Human Resource Management*.

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