Continuous Listening

The Evolution of Employee Experience Measurement

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Imagine you are an athlete. Think about all the training necessary to achieve elite status. Consider the constant monitoring of your health, speed, strength, and other measures of performance readiness. There would be a constant flow of information that would help you, your coaches, and advisors know exactly what is optimized and what needs improvement.

Now imagine you are CEO of a company that aspires to be elite. You would probably want the same type of information flow to determine the performance readiness of the organization. Most organizations have this in place for their financial standing but few have it in place for monitoring the employee experience. That is an incredible liability and incredible opportunity for organizations that want to maintain elite status or ones that want to move from ordinary to extraordinary.

While employers have embraced the idea of employee engagement, their strategy for improvement has been heavily influenced by the annual employee survey: Ask the same questions once a year, look at the responses, and hope for the best when the next survey cycle rolls around. This is the equivalent of someone seeing their physician to get their annual physical. It’s good information. It can help them make healthier decisions. But it would definitely be insufficient for a world-class athlete.

There are a handful of emerging trends that are driving organizations to act more like elite performers. Evolving employee expectations as well as a quicker speed of business require that employers completely change the way they think about keeping employees engaged and understanding the employee experience. Even when employers understand that engagement relies on frequent communication, our research has found that:

- Only 11% of employers are surveying employees more than once a year
- More than a quarter of employers survey every other year or less frequently

It’s time to change the way employers understand the employee experience (not just engagement) and how to manage it—and Continuous Listening is the answer. To accurately measure and manage the level of psychological investment employees put in an organization, employers must change the way they get that information. This white paper will:

- Examine the difference between traditional engagement measurement and Continuous Listening,
- Explore the benefits of Continuous Listening, and
- Detail the steps necessary to implement it at your organization.
Employee engagement is a simple concept: it’s the level of an employee’s psychological investment in the organization. It’s easy to understand and, when done right, easy to measure. Employee engagement is best measured by asking whether employees:

- **Say** positive things about the organization
- **Stay** at the organization
- **Strive** to give the best efforts they can to help the organization succeed

The annual survey is the most well-known traditional engagement measurement and it’s definitely useful: it can provide a broad picture of the employee experience and identify correlations between enabling employees and engagement. But the annual survey is hampered by sizable limitations, such as:

- **Timing and timeliness.** Is once a year really enough to determine engagement levels at an organization? Is an annual snapshot an accurate picture?
- **Relevance.** Do surveys that focus on employee engagement alone identify bigger issues such as culture, leadership effectiveness, and organizational health?
- **Useful insights.** If engagement takes a sharp drop, does an annual survey provide useful information about why it went down—and what can be done to fix it?
- **Size and effort.** Is it worth it to put all the effort into managing an annual project that is then set aside until another year is up and it’s time to bring it out again?

Another flaw for many organizations in the annual survey approach is that the survey itself has turned into an event that merely focuses on “moving the needle” on a rating or number. This approach means employers can lose sight of the purpose of these efforts, which is to focus on the people in the organization and the actions you can take to manage them more effectively.

To address these issues, engagement measurement has evolved into what is known as Continuous Listening. This is the process of gathering feedback more broadly across the employee lifecycle and at much more frequent intervals.

This approach is the next generation of measuring employee engagement and, more holistically, the employee experience. New surveys and technologies can collect data from candidates even before they are employees and can extend after the employee leaves the company. These surveys can be long or short, and offered as frequently as every day, if necessary, or at specific times in an employee lifecycle. By combining rigorous data and survey science with powerful technology that provides deeper insights into the results, organizations can get a much clearer picture about how their employees feel about working there—and how organizational leaders can much more immediately manage engagement.
The Increased Importance of Intangible Assets

Many CEOs would say their employees are their most important asset—but if that is true then their employees should hear from and be heard by company leaders and managers more than once a year.

According to research conducted by Ocean Tomo, the average S&P 500 company attains 84% of its value from intangible assets—ideas, software, relationships, contracts, institutional knowledge, and so on. Only 16% comes from tangible assets—equipment, land, cash, etc. This is a major change from 30 years ago, when about 80% of value came from tangible assets and only 20% from intangible assets.¹

People create those intangible assets and have become far more important than anything else in determining value in an organization. Consider an organization like LinkedIn. They had about 10,000 employees around the time they were acquired by Microsoft for $26B USD. That is $2.6M USD for every single employee in the organization. Yes, LinkedIn has office space, equipment, and cash, but, overwhelmingly, their value is based on stuff you cannot touch created by thousands and thousands of very important employees.

If people are so important to an organization’s success and value, shouldn’t the organization hear from them more than once a year?

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Why Are Companies Making the Shift?

(Continued)

The Evolution of Software

It’s a much more realistic proposition for employers to survey employees more often because of the advances in software capabilities in recent years. No longer do employers have to manage stacks of stapled questionnaires or collate bubble-read sheets to get the annual insights from employee surveys. Competitive pricing and expanded capabilities have made it affordable and easy for employers to gather feedback and to do it more often.

These software advances have improved reporting as well. Company leaders and managers do not have to decipher spreadsheets of data; results can easily be mined online and shared with others. Tutorials can highlight key points for managers quickly and easily to help them identify action steps. Overall advances in software have made data science easier for everyone.

The Rise of the Feedback Culture

It’s not just Millennials who want more feedback. Modern consumer culture has made instant feedback quick and easy—and a part of doing business, whether you purchase an item online, share a ride (ranking your passenger or your driver, depending on your role), or eat at a restaurant and leave a review. These changes have increased expectations among employees and managers alike, highlighting the limitations of evaluating the employee experience knowing that the next time you will be asked will be in a year.

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Everyone is familiar with the annual employee survey. But even useful ones that take a scientific approach to content and provide recommendations are good for only so long and provide a one-moment opportunity for an employee to summarize a year’s worth of experiences, triumphs, setbacks, and ideas.

Continuous Listening gathers different kinds of feedback across the employee lifecycle and at much more frequent intervals than the old annual employee survey. It’s not just measuring engagement; it can collect feedback about specific experiences and incidents, giving leaders a better idea of how to manage employees throughout the lifecycle.

It’s vital to remember that Continuous Listening will look different for different organizations and may change as an organization’s objectives change. In large organizations, there may be differences across departments. But the following outline can give you an idea of the kinds of tactics that make up the concept of Continuous Listening and how it relies on greater frequency and a richer set of questions over time.

**Pre-Employment**
As an organization screens candidates for open positions, it can ask questions periodically about the candidate experience to determine whether its screening, assessment, application, and interview techniques are effective. Candidates who end up declining a job offer can be quickly surveyed to find out what may have been the deciding factor. The candidate experience is especially important for those companies that might not hire someone but still want that person to be a customer and say good things about the organization. Consumer brands and retailers often fall into this category.

**Employment**
When an employee starts at the organization, an entrance survey a week into employment can measure things like onboarding effectiveness and understanding of the employee value proposition. While not directly measuring employee engagement, these factors have an effect on engagement; surveying at this time can highlight what the organization is doing well or where it needs improvement.

A month into employment, the new employee might be asked to assess how effectively they are being trained. Three to six months later, it may be time to include new employees in regular employee engagement surveys as well as reassessing onboarding and value proposition effectiveness. After six months, the focus then shifts more toward employee engagement and the employee experience.
Exit
Even when highly engaged, there will still be employees who leave your organization. At this point in the employee lifecycle, surveying them about the reason for leaving is important. In addition, an organization can still get a reading on employee engagement and the employee experience to ensure offboarding processes are effective. A post-employment survey may be useful in some cases, such as a loss that was regrettable but unavoidable because of a spouse moving, for example.

As you can see, Continuous Listening truly is continuous. It means your organization will be taking different kinds of readings built around variable content and timing depending on where employees are in the employee lifecycle. But by applying targeted questions tied to that point in the employee lifecycle, rather than trying to apply the same questions to the same population without context every year or six months, you can get a much more accurate reading of how effective your processes are, how employees really feel about working at your organization, and what your next steps should be.

Analytics Brings It Together
For organizations that effectively roll out a Continuous Listening strategy, they will find they have mountains of data about the employee experience. Valuable in their silos, the data become far more meaningful when they are integrated and reported back to leaders to give them a fuller, richer, more holistic understanding of the organization's health.

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Evolving your employee engagement measurement process to incorporate Continuous Listening can be a challenge. Working with an experienced consulting partner means you can take advantage of proven processes that get results instead of plugging in some new technology on your own and hoping it works.

As with any change in strategy, it’s vital to have buy-in from the top and that everyone is on the same page when it comes to setting objectives and goals. In our experience, there is no pattern of success when it comes to industry, size, or company culture of the organizations that use Continuous Listening. Instead, we find that the kinds of organizations that make a smooth transition and get the most out of Continuous Listening are:

- **Curious.** Organizational leaders want to know what is going on with employees and how they can improve their experience. They are interested in the data, how it can be segmented, and the kinds of insights they hold. Employees also have a degree of curiosity about the process and the improvement it can bring to an organization.

- **Comfortable with technology.** You cannot embark on a Continuous Listening strategy without working with technology solutions, so organizational leaders and managers must be willing and able to get their information from dashboards, reports, and other technology sources. In addition, employees must be able to participate in surveys through a technology platform, which may be desktop, mobile, or through a kiosk, depending on the work environment.

- **Courageous.** It’s not easy to constantly receive feedback. Honest responses can, at first, muddy the path of progress. Organizations that are dedicated to the process, willing to ask tough questions, ready to get the responses, and willing to act on the feedback are much more likely to see success.

Your company leaders must be ready to make the change, and clearly understand what is at stake when implementing this initiative. Here are some steps to follow:

**Assess Leadership Readiness**

According to data from our Global Employee Research Database, there are several critical drivers that leaders must display to drive engagement at an organization:

- Establish direction and shared purpose.
- Demonstrate character and integrity.
- Develop and retaining talent.
- Apply knowledge and sound judgment.
- Interact with others.
How to Make the Shift
to Continuous Listening (Continued)

Sound obvious? It may be, but organizations do not always have leaders who can help drive employee engagement. To ensure your Continuous Listening efforts succeed, take the time to ensure that your leaders are capable of seeing them through. Then follow these steps.

1. Determine Your Objectives
Examine the questions stakeholders have. At its most fundamental level, this will be about how engaged employees are. But there are all sorts of other questions that can be measured as well: What is going on in the employee experience during the first 90 days? Why is it so hard to attract talent? Do employees really understand the value proposition the organization offers? How are leaders affecting the ability to drive strategy? Continuous Listening does not mean asking employees about engagement over and over again.

Determining your objectives will set the tone for the content and cadence of the surveys you give to employees. It will also determine who gets the results and what the organization might do with those results. This is the step where a strong Continuous Listening consulting partner can help you identify what it is you are trying to learn and give you recommendations on what to ask and of whom.

2. Craft Content
Once you have identified objectives, you and your Continuous Listening partner will develop questions and answers that help you uncover insights into those objectives. Using top survey-design science and a careful understanding of your company’s culture and language will let you write questions that get the answers you need to make changes at your organization.

3. Source
Surveys with “strongly agree” type scales are the most common source of employee input by far. Other sources of employee input may be the largely untapped mass of comments from surveys. Another question is the data collection vehicle. As technology evolves, access to employees through mobile devices and kiosks will continue to accelerate—paper and even computer-based access will likely diminish. Tomorrow’s workplace is going to have wearable technologies and will be influenced by the Internet of Things. These will be two new sources to consider using in the future to get valuable information about the employee experience.

4. Determine Timing
Timing can vary greatly, depending on what you are measuring and how many people you are asking. Single-item questions might go out daily; others might be triggered by a specific event, such as an earnings release. Over time, though, you will establish patterns and trends that can help you identify recurring themes in how people feel about working at your organization.
When it comes to timing, it’s important to remember that this shift to Continuous Listening does not happen overnight. Organizations do not go from an annual employee survey to varied approaches about different topics in a short amount of time. The process is introduced gradually to help employees get used to the rhythm of providing information through a platform and managers get used to acting on insights. An organization may start with Continuous Listening around employee engagement and then add onboarding measurements six months later, for example.

5. Act on the Findings
The most important part of Continuous Listening comes at the end of the cycle—action. It is paramount that organizational leaders and managers do something with the data they collect.

While the level of action depends on leadership capacity and the ability of HR to support change, asking for feedback from employees implies a commitment to change. If your organization asks but does not change, it’s a recipe for disaster.

As you can see, moving toward Continuous Listening is modeled on Change Management. As such, HR leaders should have a clear understanding of the change readiness of their organization. In Aon Hewitt’s change-readiness model, behavior is a function of:

- **Understanding.** There is an awareness of change and what is expected from change.
- **Emotion.** You may be excited about the prospect of getting lots of data to work through or you may feel overwhelmed.
- **Ability.** You feel you have the skills and knowledge to help the organization move toward Continuous Listening.
- **Intent.** You and other company leaders have a purposeful willingness to work differently as a result of data insights.

HR and other company leaders must feel comfortable answering those questions for themselves, and so must:

- Other leaders within the organization or on governing boards.
- HR business partners.
- The IT department—are they ready to support all that data?
- Managers.
6. Identify Governance

In any Continuous Listening effort, there will be questions about who is responsible for the data and actions to take from the results. Some managers may want to ask different questions that seem more applicable to their own teams, for example. The question then becomes how to maintain control of the center in such a way that it balances the needs of managers and leaders in the organization while still complying with the overall Continuous Listening strategy.

Software can lock down different parts of surveying and reporting to comply with your efforts but it’s important that leaders and managers all understand how their actions may uphold or undermine the overall strategy.

7. Integration

Organizations with evolved Continuous Listening strategies will have an abundance of data to better understand different phases of the employee experience. To truly tell a comprehensive story about the organization, integrating the data will be critical. Knowing that effective onboarding leads to engagement or longer retention are insights integrated datasets can teach us.

Technology like Aon Hewitt’s Heat analytics platform can help pull various data sources together. But technology alone will not do it. More questions and more data will require a thoughtful approach on data visualization and analytics that come together in a coherent story that map back to objectives.

8. Be Prepared

Finally, it’s important to understand some of the issues you will need to be ready for when working with Continuous Listening principles. Those issues may include:

- **Privacy concerns.** When you are capturing all this information about employees and linking it back to business units or departments, there is a risk that people may feel singled out. Your organization must be committed to privacy and to using insights for improvement, not to punish.

- **An assumption of knowledge.** Once leaders and managers start getting deeper insights into how employees feel, it’s easy to start making assumptions about what is going on. Nothing will replace deeper conversations with direct reports about how they feel, so use data from Continuous Listening to guide actions, not to take the place of face-to-face discussions.

- **Asking without acting.** You may find you are so overwhelmed with data that it’s difficult to know where to start. Stick to your objectives. Look for ways to act on the data and communicate back to employees the changes that are being made. Do not feel it is necessary to do it all alone. Employees have offered their opinions. Get them involved in the problem solving too.
Continuous Listening Done Two Different Ways
Continuous Listening will look slightly different depending on the industry, size of the company, internal and external pain points, goals, and so on. In one case, a global entertainment company was frustrated with the standard annual survey, which it found slow and rigid, and only measured employee engagement. The company wanted to learn more about how employees felt about the onboarding experience and what departing employees might say before they left.

Aon’s Global Culture & Engagement Practice designed a feedback system that measured what the company wanted to learn, when it wanted to learn it. Under the new Continuous Learning system, new employees were measured three times during their early tenures and pulse engagement surveys were performed monthly. Employees leaving the organization were given a chance to provide feedback. As a result, the company can now change experiences employees are having and integrate employee data with other key metrics.

In another example, the CEO of a telecommunications company realized that frequent feedback was needed to get a more accurate picture of how employees felt in the volatile industry. The Global Culture & Engagement Practice developed a pulse survey strategy that samples 2,000 employees every two weeks on customized survey items depending on current priorities. The company can now monitor volatility while facing industry challenges and the executive team can respond quickly to timely issues. In addition, the CEO can openly respond to feedback, adding a level of transparency that previously didn’t exist.
Conclusion

What are the measures that determine the health, speed, and strength of your organization? Are you measuring and monitoring them once a year like the weekend athlete? Or does your organization aspire to be extraordinary? If so, you’ve determined you need data about your employees the same way elite athletes get data about their performance readiness—continuously.

Employee engagement is a useful business process—but only if it’s done right. It’s time for progressive organizations to move past the monotonous, unchanging annual survey and embrace the flexible, adaptable model of Continuous Listening. As elite organizations put increasing value on their intangible assets and embrace powerful new technology tools, Continuous Listening will represent the next stage of understanding the employee experience and help organizations get the most out of their employees.

How Aon Can Help
We have the most leading-edge technology and an equally impressive group of global consultants that can help drive towards a culture and engagement strategy customized for your organization. To learn more about how we can help or to see a demonstration of our technology, please contact one of the contributors to this article listed on the following page.
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