

Sampling for Organizational Surveys

When choosing a sample for an organizational survey there are several considerations, both politically and statistically, you should take into account.

Political Considerations

- ❑ Everyone who will be expected to take actions based on survey results should be given the chance to provide input.
- ❑ People who are involved in the process are more likely to feel ownership and contribute to any resulting organizational intervention.
- ❑ Excluding people from the survey can send unintended messages. Will employees feel unimportant or neglected if they cannot participate? Will you appear to be favoring certain groups? Will it emphasize a difference between groups (such as management versus non-management)?
- ❑ Top executives are often viewed as being too busy to participate in surveys. However, getting them involved can make them more vested in the outcomes and change process.

Sample versus Census

Our recommendation is that you survey everyone in the organization (census). People in different jobs, locations and levels often provide very different feedback on the organization. These differences are often more revealing than the overall results.

However, sometimes it is not feasible to survey everyone. If you are deciding between census or sampling, consider the following issues:

- ❑ Survey as many people as you can.
- ❑ If the intent of the survey is to launch a change initiative, you should consider using a census. This gives everyone a voice and creates more buy-in during the change process.
- ❑ Consider the monetary costs to your company. For larger companies it often makes more sense to sample from a cost and logistical perspective. Smaller companies need such a large proportion of their people sampled to meet the statistical requirements that it is often just as cost-effective to do a census.

- ❑ If you collect sample data, some people might question the accuracy or legitimacy of the results. Sampling is a statistically valid method, but some people will try to use it as an excuse to resist organizational change interventions.
- ❑ If the organization is just seeking a “temperature check” or the results will have limited use, then sampling might be the best approach.
- ❑ If you are sampling, try to choose a random sample. You should also make sure to choose people from all of the groups that you would like compared in the reports.
- ❑ Whenever sampling is used, certain statistical guidelines should be followed in order to ensure validity of the data. See the guidelines described below.

Probability Sampling Theory

There are three major statistical considerations related to sampling.

- 1. Margin of Error** – Margin of error refers to how close the reported value is expected to be to the true value of the population of interest. This reported value is expressed as being within a certain “margin of error”, such as +/- 5 percentage points. This is also referred to as a confidence interval. “How confident are we that the results of our sampled survey are accurate for the entire organization”. A typical level of confidence used for survey work is 95 percent (or +/- 5 points). *For example, if we find that 50% of employees agree with a certain item of the survey we can be quite confident that the true value is between 45-55% of employees agreeing with that item.*
- 2. Level of Confidence** – Level of confidence refers to the amount of certainty that our sample findings are correct (within the margin of error). Most researchers try to achieve at least a 95 percent confidence level. *For example, 95 out of 100 times we will get the same results.*
- 3. Occurrence of Characteristic** – Occurrence of the characteristic refers to how common the characteristic is in the population. For example, do we expect 50% favorable and 50% unfavorable responses or is it closer to 90%-10%? Unless we’re measuring something that we anticipate to be skewed we can usually use the 50-50 assumption.

Determining Sample Size for Various Populations

You can use the following chart as a guide for determining the number of people to sample. These minimum numbers should result in statistically valid results. However, we always encourage you to sample as many people as possible.

This table assumes that:

- The sample will be randomly chosen.
- There will be a 100% response rate. (If a lower response rate is anticipated, you should increase the number of people sampled).
- There are no systematic differences between respondents and non-respondents.

Population Size	Required Sample	As % of Population
50,000	381	0.8
25,000	378	1.5
10,000	370	3.7
5,000	357	7.1
2,500	333	13.3
1,000	285	28.5
500	217	43.4
250	152	60.8
200	132	66.0
100	80	80.0
50	44	88.0
25	24	96.0

Note: Sample sizes assume a confidence level of 95%, a margin of error of 5 points (plus or minus), and a 50/50 split in the characteristic being measured. This based on probability sampling the most respected method used by survey researchers currently (Babbie, 1990).

Table Source: Adapted from Rea, L.M. & Parker, R.A. (1992). *Designing and conducting survey research: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

References

- Babbie, E. (1990). *Survey research methods: Second edition*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Kraut, A.I. (1996). *Organizational surveys: Tools for assessment and change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.