

How to Use Pulse Surveys to Uncover & Cure Worker Stress, Fatigue, & Burnout



The immortal Yogi Berra once described baseball as “90% mental; the other half is physical.” Workplace safety is much the same. The OHS program you work so hard to build may crumble under the weight of the mental challenges plaguing the workers you’re trying to protect. While workplace stress, [fatigue](#), and burnout (which we’ll refer to collectively as “stress”) are perennial challenges, they will assume even greater urgency in these times of tariffs and economic uncertainty.

Result: OHS coordinators must attack the stress problem proactively and not just react to complaints. Assuming that workers will just come to you for help if they were having mental difficulties is naïve, especially in an environment where workers fear for their jobs. One effective method for unearthing stress is “pulse surveying” in which workers fill out a regular, brief and targeted questionnaire tracking the workplace psychological environment over time. Here’s a 10 step Game Plan for performing workplace stress pulse surveys at your workplace.

Step 1. Define Your Pulse Survey

Objectives

Rooting out hidden workplace stress problems like toxic, unsafe, unethical, or illegal behaviour is just one potential HR application. Data from pulse surveys can help not only root out stress, toxic environments, noncompliance, and other OHS problems but also monitor progress toward and identify opportunities for achieving other key goals such as boosting worker engagement, morale, productivity, company culture, leadership effectiveness, inter-department communication, and organizational transparency. So, the starting point for pulse surveying is to identify your objectives and ensure that they align with your overall OHS and company business goals.

Step 2. Create a Pulse Survey Communication Plan

Pulse surveying doesn't work unless workers actually engage and respond at high rates. To gain buy-in, you must let workers know what you're doing, how the survey process works, the goals you're trying to achieve and, above all, what's in it for them. Stress that surveying is an opportunity for workers to provide meaningful, anonymous feedback that the company needs to make changes to improve their safety, health and work experience. [Communication](#) goes beyond a single one-off announcement before launch. You need to maintain communication with workers throughout the survey process via multiple channels, such as scheduled email messages, face-to-face announcements by department heads or managers, and/or push notifications through an employee app. Invite workers to ask and ensure managers are prepared to answer questions about the surveys.

Step 3. Set an Appropriate Pulse

Surveying Schedule

Getting the timing and cadence right is essential to pulse surveying success. Surveys must be frequent enough to keep workers engaged but not so frequent as to cause “survey fatigue.” Consider how quickly the things you’re measuring are likely to change—for example, worker satisfaction tends to fluctuate more than engagement. Quarterly surveying is better suited for measuring long-term trends or shifts, while weekly or bi-weekly surveys should be reserved only for situations requiring immediate feedback. Other Best Practices for scheduling [pulse surveys](#):

- Give yourself enough time between surveys to analyze and communicate the results of the most recent survey.
- Avoid surveying during busy periods when workers have less time to respond.
- Coordinate pulse surveys with your other regular worker surveys, such as annual engagement surveys.

Step 4. Create Effective Format for Pulse Survey Questions

Pulse surveys should be short and simple, requiring workers no more than 5 minutes to complete. Structure questions that will provide you the most informative answers. The typical approach is to list a statement about an aspect of what you’re measuring and ask workers if they agree or disagree. While YES/NO is the simplest structure, providing a numeric scale indicating ranges of agreement/disagreement, e.g., “1: strongly disagree” to “5: strongly agree,” provides more nuanced information. Best Practice: Use the 70/20/10 rule in structuring your questions with:

- **70% Driver Questions** directly point to things that you can fix based on responses. Example: To the extent it elicits negative responses, the question “My manager

stresses the importance of a harassment-free work environment” signals that you need to provide more effective harassment training to your managers.

- **20% Outcome Questions** enable you to measure the big picture, particularly regarding workers’ satisfaction and workplace climate. Example: Negative responses to the question, “I feel like everybody in the facility treats me with respect” signal that there may be something toxic going on in the workplace.
- **10% Open-Ended Questions**, such as “What one thing could we do better to make you feel physically and mentally better at work” enable workers to express ideas, suggestions or concerns that you didn’t anticipate in framing your rating scales questions.

Step 5: Ask the Right Pulse Survey Questions

With only 5 minutes to work with, you must ensure that pulse surveys ask questions that generate actionable information about stress or whatever metrics you’re tracking. Five to 15 questions in total is the unofficial rule. Keep each survey new and fresh but don’t drastically change it each time. Best Practice: Include 2 or 3 core “trend tracker” questions repeated on each survey to furnish a baseline and set of stable metrics that you can monitor from quarter to quarter or whatever your pulse survey frequency is. Select the remaining questions, including regular questions that you can rotate in and out, based on the current situation, previous feedback, and other factors.

Step 6. Guarantee Survey Participants’ Anonymity

Allowing workers to complete pulse surveys anonymously is the best way to get candid and insightful feedback. If you can’t totally avoid them, at least minimize survey questions that

ask for information that may enable the company to determine a worker's identity, e.g., the department in which they work. Tell workers that you do this to foster their trust.

Step 7. Test the Pulse Survey Before You Release It

Something about the survey you compose might not sit well with certain workers. Maybe one of the questions is confusing or laden with technical jargon that some workers won't understand. Or a question might seem biased, self-serving, or framed to steer the worker to provide a specific response. That's why it's advisable to run each survey past one or more workers in the target group before releasing it company-wide.

Step 8. Analyze Pulse Survey Results

How you analyze survey poll data is just as important as how you gather it. Best Practices:

- Assess the reliability of each survey's findings by considering, among other things, how many workers responded and how representative a sample those respondents are.
- Look for trends by tracking survey responses over time, focusing primarily on the core questions.
- Identify potential problems by zeroing in on low-scoring items or recurring negatives expressed in open-ended questions.

Step 9. Take Actions in Response to Pulse Survey Results

Pulse surveying is worse than meaningless if you're not prepared to act on the findings. This is especially true when surveying uncovers evidence of violence, harassment or a toxic

environment requiring immediate action under OHS, workers' comp, and other laws. The longer you wait to address the issue, the greater the risk of litigation, enforcement action, and liability becomes.

Step 10. Report Pulse Survey Results

Be sure to report the results of each survey not only to company leaders and managers but also to workers, including a description of the action you took or plan to take to address the problems surveying identified. This kind of transparency will affirm workers' trust in not only the surveying process but the company's commitment to furnish them the safest and healthiest workplace mental environment possible.