

ISSUES OF MERIT

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Post-Survey Action Planning

Research identifies three strategies to help make the most of employee survey results.

Many of us have responded to at least one employee survey, such as the recently administered Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). These surveys provide employees with a voice and help identify organizational strengths and weaknesses. When employees provide input on surveys, they expect management to use the information to make positive changes in the organization. That's why post-survey action planning is critical to every survey administration. Action planning involves analyzing the data, identifying opportunities for improvement, creating actionable plans for implementing change, and communicating with employees about how their feedback is being used. Such action planning often does not occur or, when it does, is frequently not implemented effectively.

Recent research reported in the *Journal of Personnel Psychology* highlights factors that contribute to positive change from action planning.¹ Lena-Alyeska Heubner and Hannes Zacher conducted their research in a large multinational organization with over 900 work groups. This organization tracked employee survey results and subsequent action planning by managers across 3 years. Each year, the manager responsible for each work group reviewed survey results and indicated whether the group engaged in action planning based on the results. A review after 3 years indicated that when managers engaged in post-survey action planning, employee attitude scores improved. When they did no action planning, employee attitude scores decreased. While these general results are not surprising, three specific findings have implications for how Federal agencies and other organizations can make action planning more effective.

Target interventions at the appropriate organizational level. The employee survey in the study covered four areas of employee concern: work processes; interpersonal relationships; personal well-being; and perceptions of the parent organization. Action planning at the work group level improved scores on the first three dimensions but did not improve scores on the fourth dimension, which dealt with organizational factors. Researchers commented that such factors are not easily changed by individual managers. Topics of a cross-organizational nature, such as the reputation of the employer, may not benefit much from work group-level interventions. They require organization-wide interventions initiated and coordinated by senior leadership. The lesson learned is that effective action plans are targeted at the appropriate organizational level and address issues responsive to intervention at that level.

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The MSPB Office of Policy and Evaluation conducts studies to assess the health of Federal merit systems and to ensure they are free from prohibited personnel practices.

Issues of Merit

We offer insights and analyses on topics related to Federal human capital management, particularly findings and recommendations from our independent research.

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Set realistic expectations about the time needed for organizational change. The greatest improvement in employee attitude scores occurred when managers engaged in action planning in all 3 years studied. For most of these work groups there were modest changes after the first year and larger improvements following the second year of planning and interventions. Some participating managers indicated that a 1-year cycle between surveys was not enough time for the interventions in their plans to have significant effects. MSPB has raised similar concerns about the congressionally mandated 1-year assessment cycle of the FEVS. The organization studied had a long-term vision of change, and that allowed efforts to continue beyond the somewhat arbitrary boundary of the next annual survey. Federal agencies should do the same and adopt realistic expectations about the time needed to plan, implement, and measure the effects of interventions.

Provide sufficient manager training. The researchers also emphasized the importance of managers receiving training in best practices for post-survey action planning and implementation. Some training and expectation-setting about dealing with change for managers' subordinates may also be appropriate. This recommendation is based on comments by several participating managers who made action plans but did not follow through on implementing them because of uncertainty and lack of experience with organizational change. This is a frequently expressed concern about action planning.² While customized, context-sensitive training in each organization might be most effective, such training is often infeasible. There are several resources that allow managers to learn about effective action planning in the absence of formal training. OPM outlines how to conduct action planning in their *Guide for Interpreting and Acting on Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Results*. Additional resources include the National Institutes of Health's *Workforce Planning Toolkit* and MSPB's own *Survey Results Action Guide*.

Organization-wide surveys allow employee voices to be heard about their work experiences and concerns. Implementing action plans at the appropriate organizational level, setting realistic expectations about the time needed for organizational change, and training managers in action planning are strategies that can help translate what we hear from employees into positive organizational change. ❖

¹Huebner, A. & Zacher, H. (2022). "Effects of action planning after employee surveys." *Journal of Personnel Psychology*, 2(1), 23-36.

²Brown, M.I. (2021). "Does action planning create more harm than good? Common challenges in the practice of action planning after employee surveys." *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. Advance online publication.

Pulse Surveys

Pulse surveys are an important tool agencies can use to measure employee feedback on specific topics. These surveys are short, frequent check-ins that generally consist of 3-4 questions. The content can change with each survey, and the resulting data often supplement larger employee survey efforts.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) recently began a pulse survey pilot to help inform the Administration on how to best support the Federal workforce. For more information on that effort, click here. Keep in mind that it is still important to communicate and act on the feedback received to ensure employees stay engaged in the process.

How to Create an Ethical Work Culture

Dr. Tiffany J. Lightbourn joins the Office of Policy and Evaluation as its new Director and offers her perspective on how to create a culture that supports ethical decision-making.

After working many years in academia, Federal research, and Federal human resources (HR), I am excited to lead an organization with the mission to support merit through objective, non-partisan studies that evaluate policies, operations, and practices that guide the Federal workforce.

Forthcoming MSPB publications will shine light on how well issues of harassment and adherence to the merit system principles (MSPs) are dealt with in Federal workplaces. Regardless of the improvements noted in our studies, we still find that inappropriate behaviors are observed and that we have opportunities to improve. Improvement starts with creating an ethical work culture. By my definition, an ethical work culture is one that encourages employees and leadership to do the right thing in their interactions with each other and with those they serve. When defining “the right thing to do,” the organization should define what it values, and the MSPs are a great place to start. But the big question is this: How do you design a workplace to be ethical and adhere to the MSPs? Here are some of my thoughts on that.

Document what you value. Document organizational values statements, and incorporate them into the organizational vision, strategic goals, and policies where appropriate. Also, have a code of conduct for employees and leaders that is more than just aspirational—that also expresses the lived experience of working in the organization.

Ensure leadership embodies what you value. Ensure that leaders at all levels embody the values of the organization. Use these values to influence how you select for and manage leaders and measure your leadership team’s effectiveness. Leaders should articulate the values of the organization, how they plan to exhibit these values, and how they will hold their team accountable for results. This ensures accountability for ethical behavior and makes it meaningful.

Develop an action plan. Ethical work environments require action. Planning for how values are communicated, measured, monitored, and rewarded is key. Recurrent training on the organization’s values and what is expected at all levels of the organization ensures that everyone is working from the same assumptions. But more importantly, employees and the public we serve want to see the values of the organization at work. For instance, I recently held a leadership position with the Internal Revenue Service where tax integrity is a key value. As a result, employees are expected to remain in tax compliance as a condition of their employment.

Incorporate ethics into hiring practices. If an organization values ethical employees, they should assess for ethics during the hiring process. Just as you might interview applicants and measure their emotional intelligence or technical expertise, consider asking questions about how they would deal with situations requiring ethical judgment. For instance, present applicants with a work scenario, and evaluate the ethical appropriateness of their solution alongside its practicality. Behaviorally based questions can provide insights into not only the integrity of potential employees but also their judgment and application of ethical principles. Reference checks are another avenue through which hiring managers can ask about applicants’ judgment when faced with ethical dilemmas.

Hold people accountable. Ensure that employees know their rights but also their responsibilities. If there are breaches in codes of conduct, ensure that appropriate actions are taken to address the needs of the target of the unethical behavior and redress the behavior of the offender. Often, HR rules do not allow supervisors to disclose how they have dealt with conduct issues, but leaders can communicate to employees that situations are being handled even if they can’t provide specifics. These steps help build trust and ensure employees know that managers take seriously their responsibilities for safeguarding ethical conduct.

Admittedly, the challenge for many Federal organizations is how to develop an organizational culture that values ethical behavior. I hope these observations can help agencies think about how they might do this, and I look forward to further engaging with *Issues of Merit* readers on HR matters affecting merit. ❖

Tiffany J. Lightbourn, Ph.D.
Director, Policy and Evaluation

Why Feds Want to Quit: Growth, Respect, Pay

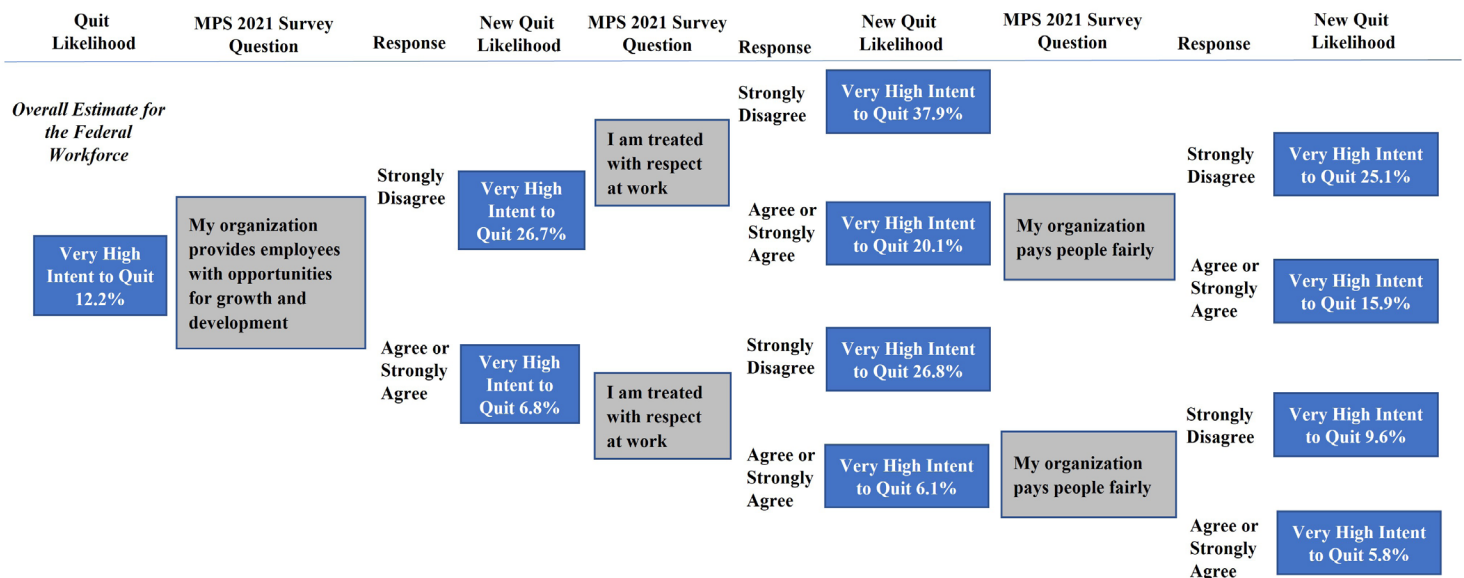
According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, a record-setting 47 million people in the U.S. voluntarily quit their jobs during 2021; a large number of resignations have continued into 2022. The Federal Government has also seen an increase in resignations. According to FedScope, the online Federal workforce data tool, 2.4 percent of permanent, full-time employees on the rolls in 2020 had voluntarily quit their jobs for reasons other than retirement. By the end of 2021, 3 percent had voluntarily quit. While this is a small percentage increase in absolute terms, it represents a statistically significant 26.6 percent year-over-year increase. Often described as “the Great Resignation,” the recent trend of Americans choosing to leave their employer has generated much scholarly inquiry as to why.

For instance, in February 2022, the Pew Research Center conducted a nationally representative panel study survey of 9,388 randomly selected U.S. adults.¹ They asked people who quit their job in 2021 why they had done so. The main reasons cited were: (1) lack of opportunities for advancement, (2) feeling disrespected, and (3) dissatisfaction with pay. Additional research by Gloat Research Board and Inflection Poynt supported those findings.² While this research had a private sector focus, we speculated that the same growth, respect, and pay drivers may also affect Federal employees’ quit intentions. Our 2021 Merit Principles Survey (MPS) asked Federal employees about the three drivers Pew identified and about respondents’ quit intentions. To estimate overall quit intentions for each respondent, we used their highest agreement level from among the three quit intentions listed.

MPS 2021 Questions	
Quit Drivers	Quit Intentions
• My organization provides employees with opportunities for growth and development.	• I plan to move to a different occupation or line of work.
• I am treated with respect at work.	• I plan to move to a different organization or agency.
• My organization pays employees fairly.	• I plan to resign from the Federal Government.

With 25,044 complete responses, we found that 12.2 percent of Federal respondents had very high quit intentions. We used machine learning and advanced analytics to examine how this percentage changed as respondents agreed or disagreed with how well their respective organizations paid them fairly, provided them with opportunities for growth and development, and treated them with respect at work. The results are presented below in the form of a decision tree.³

Following one branch of the tree, we find that agreeing that they have growth and development opportunities cut employees’ high quit intentions almost in half (to 6.8 percent), while strongly disagreeing more than doubled these intentions (26.7 percent). Among these 26.7 percent, strongly disagreeing that they are treated with respect increased these intentions to 37.9 percent, while agreeing reduced intentions to 20.1 percent. Among these 20.1 percent, agreeing reduced intentions to 6.1 percent, while agreeing increased intentions to 15.9 percent.



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that their organization pays them fairly cut intentions to 15.9 percent, while strongly disagreeing increased intentions to 25.1 percent. The reader may explore other branches, but it becomes clear that strong quit intentions vary with how well or poorly the organization meets growth and development, respect, and pay fairness needs. Indeed, an organization's strength in one area may compensate for weakness in another.

Another takeaway from this analysis is that pay was somewhat less controlling of quit intentions than was the need for growth and respect, as evidenced by pay appearing farther downstream in the model. Furthermore, among those who disagreed with the respect question, no further significant differences were found in quit intention whether a person agreed or disagreed with the pay question.

The period from 2020 to 2022 brought considerable employee movement between jobs, and the latest research suggests that employees' need for growth, respect, and better pay may have driven some of this job exploration. Agencies concerned about retaining top talent may wish to take stock in how well training and development needs are being met and how respectfully the overall organizational culture treats employees—their most valuable resource. ❖

¹ Pew Research Center (March 9, 2022). "Majority of workers who quit a job in 2021 cite low pay, no opportunities for advancement, feeling disrespected." A panel study involves recruiting members from an affiliate site, where they are asked to register and confirm their interest in taking multiple surveys over an extended period.

² See Gloat Research Board (December 2021). *The Great Resignation Research Report*; Inflection Poynt (March 25, 2022). "Driven retention survey: Data & insights from real employees."

³ The decision tree methodology uses the Chi-Square Automatic Interaction Detector (CHAID) algorithm with cross-validation. The method uses many sets of cross-tabulations and within-group cross-tabulations to find the combination of survey item responses that best classify the respondents into the two quit intent groups. For instance, only when a respondent strongly disagrees that the organization supports growth does the respondent suffer an increase in quit potential. If they only disagree, the effect is muted and not shown. On the other hand, if they *either* agree or strongly agree that the organization supports growth, the respondent enjoys a decrease in quit potential.

MSPB Welcomes Two New Leaders

MSPB welcomes two executives to its leadership team. With the addition of our third Board member, MSPB now has a full complement for the first time in 7 years. In the Office of Policy and Evaluation (OPE), which is responsible for our special studies mission, we also have a new director for the first time in over 2 years.

Cathy A. Harris was appointed to serve as a Board Member, designated by the President as Vice Chairman, but currently serving as Acting Chairman pending Senate approval of her nomination as Chairman. Prior to her appointment, Ms. Harris was co-manager of the firm Kator, Parks, Weiser & Harris, PLLC where she served as the Chair of the firm's Sexual Harassment and LGBT Practice sections. She has extensive experience in the litigation and settlement of Federal sector class actions and representing individual employees. She has represented employees before MSPB, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Office of Special Counsel, and in Federal courts. Ms. Harris was an Assistant District Attorney in the New York County District Attorney's Office. She also previously served as an adjunct professor at the George Washington University Law School. Ms. Harris graduated from the George Washington University Law School with honors and received her undergraduate degree from Brown University.

Tiffany J. Lightbourn was appointed OPE Director. Prior to joining MSPB, Dr. Lightbourn served as the Director of Human Resources Shared Services at the Internal Revenue Service. Previously, she was a White House Leadership Development Fellow. Dr. Lightbourn is an experienced researcher and evaluator and seeks to make Government work better by leveraging performance and outcome data. She was the Chief of Research and Evaluation at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and started her Federal career in the DHS Science and Technology Directorate. She also is an American Association for the Advancement of Science Fellow and former professor of psychology at Vassar College. Dr. Lightbourn holds a doctorate degree in social psychology from the University of Michigan and bachelor's degrees in psychology and government from Beloit College.

In a Tight Labor Market, Rehire the Retired

To address immediate workforce needs, agencies could consider this largely untapped recruitment pool.



The “Great Resignation,” one of the terms used to describe the large number of people who have left their jobs since the beginning of the pandemic, has led to staffing challenges for many employers. The Federal Government is no exception. In fact, it may be at a distinct disadvantage in an inflationary environment because Federal pay tables are set only once a year, and media reports of proposals for the next year sit alongside economic reports of inflation at much higher rates. However, these unfortunate circumstances may also provide an opportunity to recruit members of an exceptional workforce that can hit the ground running.

This group, for whom inflation may be a particular hardship, is recent retirees under age 62. From the point of eligibility for a minimum retirement age up to age 62, retirees under the Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS) do not receive inflation adjustments to their pensions. Each year, the purchasing power of their pensions permanently decreases and is not recovered when inflation adjustments finally begin at 62. Furthermore, even once FERS retirees reach age 62, the pension adjustments are a full percentage point less than the inflation rate when inflation is at 3 percent or more. Compounding this challenge for retirees, the stock and bond markets have been faring poorly this year, which means it is not a good time to remove money from the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP). Altogether, this is a distressing picture for retirees, particularly the most recent ones as the compounding effects of inflation eating into their principal will cut the deepest for those with the most years of retirement still to come.

However, these individuals can still return to Federal service as re-employed annuitants. Not only does a re-employed annuitant collect a Federal salary, but if they serve for at least 1 year, their future annuity will be supplemented to reflect their additional service. If they serve for an additional 5 years, they can have their annuity recomputed based on their new salary. In other words, a re-employed annuitant can avoid diminishing their principal now while also *increasing* the pension that will be available to them later. Their annuity will continue to be paid as they work, and that amount will be offset (subtracted) from their salary (absent very rare circumstances that permit dual compensation).

The agency can also benefit from this arrangement. First, the agency will have an employee with a wealth of experience on day one. Agencies can use this experience not only to deliver on mission requirements, but also to train and mentor new and developing talent and conduct quality checks for services and products. Secondly, if the annuitant is hired by the same organization they left, then they are a known quantity in terms of performance. Additionally, the reemployed annuitant operates under a different set of retention rights, rendering them easier to remove in a reduction-in-force or for conduct or performance reasons. In other words, the odds of their success in the job are higher than with an ordinary selection, and the risks for the agency are lower if things do not work out for any reason.

Agencies can include re-employed annuitants in the area of consideration for their announcements, but it is also permissible to send a copy of the public announcement to any qualified person, including recent retirees who may be social media friends of current employees and thus easy to reach. This requires little effort and may reap great rewards for both the agency and its retirees. On the other hand, agencies may need to consider that these retirees could have more demands in terms of workplace flexibilities and schedules to accommodate the lives they have been living in retirement. And, eventually, these retirees will want to return to enjoying full-time retirement.

Although rehiring annuitants should not be seen as a replacement for building a talent pipeline in the organization, it can be used as a short-term solution to fill immediate workforce needs and skill gaps. Not every retiree will want to return to the office, but in a tight labor market some retirees might be interested in doing so, making them a potential candidate pool worth pursuing. ❖

College Recruitment Starts Now!

It's fall, which means college students are heading back to school. That means that it's also time for agencies to head to campus to get a jump-start on recruitment efforts for interns and new graduates. Recruiting college talent is a challenge for the Federal Government, particularly in a post-pandemic, technology-centered world. To help agencies get in the right mind-set for college recruitment, we offer the following recruitment tips for 2022.

Go virtual when possible. Having a presence on campus is important, but the pandemic has made that difficult. Video platforms allow agencies to bring their organization to campus through virtual opportunities. There are numerous types of activities agencies can perform through these types of meetings, like information-sharing sessions, meet-and-greets with recruiters, and executive outreach sessions. We've all learned over the past couple of years that, while not perfect, virtual communication can help during times of physical distancing.

Keep up with the changing technology. Research indicates that the generation entering the workforce (Gen Z) is much more comfortable building relationships, networking, and looking for jobs online than in person. That means agencies should up their social media presence and build their brand online, including on their agency website and social media apps and through online reviews. Embracing videos and text messaging to showcase the agency brand would also likely appeal to this generation. In addition, agencies should find ways to go mobile with job searches and applications (check out our IOM article about recruitment apps). Students are less likely to apply for jobs if the process is outdated.

Understand your candidate pool. With each new generation, we hear how different they are from the last. Whether that's true or not, it is important for agencies to understand the generation from which they are recruiting and the values most important to them. Research indicates that Gen Z values things like stability, diversity and inclusion, purpose-driven company values, cutting-edge technology, flexibility, and responsiveness during the hiring process. Paying attention to these areas in agency recruitment messaging could help attract students.

These are just a few steps agencies can take to modernize their college recruitment program. But the key is to start early. Students won't wait around until spring to plan for their future—neither should the agencies recruiting them. ❖

MSPB's Research Agenda Is Here!

The *MSPB Research Agenda 2022–2026* identifies the potential studies we may complete through 2026. Thanks to everyone who provided input. Below is a summary of the exciting topics you'll find on our new agenda. To see the entire research agenda and the process we used to develop it, please [click here](#).



Defending Merit

Employee Protections, Merit System Principles, Prohibited Personnel Practices, Modernizing HR Systems, Whistleblowing, Fair and Equitable Treatment, Sexual Harassment, Employment Requirements, Workplace Aggression, Individual Differences



Building an Effective Workforce

Impact of Technology on Federal Work, Workforce Restructuring, Future of Work, HR Workforce & Technology, Skill Gaps, STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and Medicine) Workforce, Retention, Employee Engagement, Benefits



Recruitment and Hiring

Fair and Open Competition, How Hiring Officials Use Selection Tools, Hiring Authorities, School-to-Service, Hiring Reform, Job Opportunity Announcements, Applicant Experience, Recruitment, Applicant Assessment



Pay and Performance

Probationary Period, Correcting Performance and Conduct, Classification, Federal Pay, Performance Appraisals, Employee Feedback, Recognition



Supervision and Leadership

Selection and Management of Federal Supervisors and Senior Executives, Team Leaders, Dual Career Paths



Focus on OPM

OPM Oversight, Role of a Central Human Resources Authority