

Expert Perspectives on Employee Voice:

# It's more than just engagement

Foreword by Michael Woodward (Dr. Woody) , Ph.D., Organizational Psychologist

**IBM Kenexa**

## Foreword



**Michael Woodward (Dr. Woody), Ph.D.**

Organizational Psychologist

Today the voice of the consumer has unprecedented reach. There is no doubt the proliferation of third party rating sites like Yelp and social media giants like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn have provided new routes to praise and protest. With a couple of clicks, the average consumer can mount a potentially harmful PR campaign with the power to damage even the world's largest organizations.

Employees, like consumers, have also found their voice has power. Sites like Glassdoor, Vault, and Memo provide outlets for employees to give both positive and negative feedback about their employers. And feedback hasn't stopped there; social media is proving just as useful a platform for employee opinion as it is for consumer feedback.

Forward thinking employers are now looking to harness this increased willingness to voice opinions. They're not only listening to customers, they're also recognizing the value of listening to employees. Rather than relying on a one-way street of comment, employers are interested in media that allow for true engagement.

It may be a hackneyed phrase, but people really are an organization's greatest asset and listening to their voice is critical to long term success. Satisfaction, engagement, and ultimately productivity depend on it. To harness the power of employee voice organizations must provide ample opportunity for employees to be part of a continuous conversation that leads to positive action.

## What is Employee Voice?

*As Michael “Dr. Woody” Woodward, PhD outlined in his foreword, the challenge for today’s managers and executives is figuring out how to best listen to and leverage employee voice for positive change.*

*To answer these questions and more, Dr. Woody and IBM Kenexa, hosted a roundtable of some of the most prominent experts from the world of industrial and organizational psychology to discuss the importance and future of employee voice.*



According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) employee voice is the means by which employees communicate their views on employment and organizational issues to their employers. It’s the main way employees can influence matters that affect them. Voice implies that communication between management and employees is a two-way exchange that enables employees to ‘have a say’ about what goes on in the organization.

“For us employee voice is about understanding views on topics, concerns and ways to improve perceptions of the workplace through our employees’ eyes.”

**Dr. Karen Paul**

HR External Relations Leader, 3M

“Employee voice is not only about listening. It’s about continuously taking the pulse of the organization, analyzing insights and acting on that information to improve business performance. It’s a two-way continuous conversation that empowers employees to share their thoughts and opinions and to ultimately help influence decision making in their organizations.”

**Dr. Jay Dorio**

Director of Employee Voice and Assessments, IBM Kenexa

## Listen with Purpose

**When it comes to listening to the voice of the employee, companies have traditionally relied on annual “census” style surveys to gauge such constructs as satisfaction and engagement. And while these methods do have value, relying only on yearly check-ins doesn’t really provide an up to the minute picture of what your employees are thinking and feeling.**

“Regardless of the style or frequency of the survey you must agree on the purpose first and only include things in the survey the company can feasibly act upon. If you don’t plan on giving out raises and bonuses why would you ask about these things?”

**Dr. Jonathan Levine**

Lead Organizational Psychologist, Stop & Shop

“When it comes to listening, our primary reason is to enhance organizational effectiveness. For example: Identifying employees’ perceptions of organizational strengths and opportunities for improvement as well as facilitating more effective two-way communication between managers and employees. It’s also an opportunity to help understand 3M through employees’ eyes because they are knowledgeable about the business and workplace. They provide an ‘insider’ perspective.”

**Dr. Karen Paul**

HR External Relations Leader, 3M

“If you are going to listen you have to do so with a purpose and always ask yourself, ‘why are we listening?’ as this will drive how you listen and the types of tools you use. With any business strategy, you have to start with a clear purpose.”

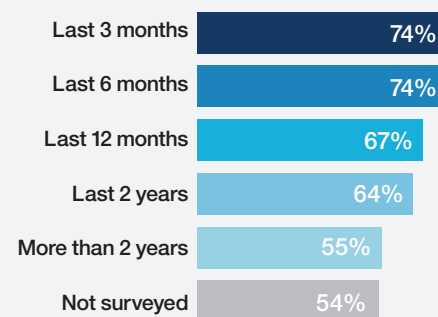
**Dr. Jay Dorio**

Director of Employee Voice and Assessments, IBM Kenexa

# Respect What Matters to Your People

What matters to people on the front lines in organizations is often in stark contrast to what matters to the decision makers in the C-suite. Seemingly small things like relaxed dress code, better parking, and more snack food options can be really important to some, while not mattering in the slightest to others. The best way to get at these issues is to actually listen to what your people have to say!

And listening frequently helps too. The longer since the employee survey, the lower the employee engagement score



“We need to move away from talking at them and instead listen to them. Oftentimes there is a divide between what matters to management and what matters to the employees on the ground. One of the mistakes we make in business is that we sit around the table nodding in agreement with what our executives believe instead of actually listening to what our people are saying.”

**Dr. Angela Pratt**

HR Director, Kellogg’s Frozen Foods and North America Marketing

“One of the common challenges with the top down approach is that employees are rarely involved in the creation of the content, which means the questions being asked aren’t always the ones most relevant to them.”

**Dr. Jonathan Levine**

Lead Organizational Psychologist, Stop & Shop

“We need to evolve the way companies engage their employees by focusing more on having continual conversations that tap the specific issues that matter to employees at every level. This starts with empowering employees to drive voice.”

**Dr. Jay Dorio**

Director of Employee Voice and Assessments, IBM Kenexa

## Ways of Listening

**The more ways there are to listen to employees, the better** % of HR professionals saying their organization's performance has got better or much better in the last year

When multiple listening methods are used HR reports twice the level of improved performance in the last year compared to no listening.



Source: WorkTrends 2015 analysis of HR professionals, global sample N=2,405

Harnessing the voice of your people today means listening in a range of different ways – one way no longer fits all. A few of the multitude of ways to listen shared in our discussions included:

- Face to face communication
- Videos
- Hotlines
- Innovation live ( like an online jam ... asking for ideas)
- Internal and external social media
- Organizational surveys
- Custom mini surveys
- Town halls
- Focus groups
- Technical council/technical forum and other internal professional societies
- Employee resource networks
- Exit interviews

In addition, some experts suggested the idea of setting up “listening posts.” Some of these listening posts include:

- Suggestion boxes or electronic suggestion/feedback kiosks
- Pulse surveys tied to town halls

IBM Smarter Workforce Institute research has confirmed the importance using multiple listening methods. HR practitioners who use multiple listening methods rated their organizational performance and reputation significantly higher than those who do not.



## Empower Employees to Drive Voice

A typical employee survey asks questions and then neatly categorizes responses from very negative to very positive. These questions can be based on the curiosities and agendas of the organization's leadership, with feedback focus on higher level initiatives as well as engagement, attitude, and sentiment.

This traditional style of listening is employer driven because it's focused on the perceived needs of management. Getting answers to these questions is no doubt important. However, the challenge of relying on this approach alone is that it often misses the actual needs of the employee.

Effective leaders understand that listening doesn't always involve asking questions. Hearing what your employees need means providing a forum for them to speak. A well rounded listening program should strike a balance between employer driven and employee driven voice to cultivate a more robust conversation about the needs of the both.

“To tap employee driven voice you must create more intimate, less formal environments. To accomplish this Kellogg's uses settings like fireside chats and coffee talks to create more intimate environments where employees can drive the conversation. Softening the power cues can go a long way in creating a more comfortable environment where employees feel safe in openly sharing their concerns with leaders. Dressing down and keeping the setting more casual is a good start.”

**Dr. Angela Pratt**

HR Director, Kellogg's Frozen Foods and North America Marketing

“One of the most important elements of any listening program is fostering employee driven voice. The act of listening can often be one-sided because far too many engagement surveys are comprised of a list of old questions that may or may not be relevant to the current audience. We should look for unique ways to draw themes out of our employees by using a mix of open-ended questioning, pulse surveys, and discussion forums.”

**Dr. Jay Dorio**

Director of Employee Voice and Assessments, IBM Kenexa



## Act Quickly and Decisively

Sharing the results of an employee listening effort and demonstrating action based on those results are two critical components to a successful listening program. Research from Church, Golay, Rotolo, Tuller, Schull, and Desrosiers (2012) found that employees who felt the results of an engagement survey were shared and actions were taken rated areas such as positive attitudes about their company, treatment by their manager, opportunities for training, and work-life balance, anywhere from 26 to 36 points higher on average than those employees who perceived no sharing or action was taken. In other words it is not enough to just listen, you must also share what you heard and act accordingly.

IBM Smarter Workforce Institute research has also highlighted that employees feel less positive that action will be taken on their feedback as they progress through their careers.

“Closing the loop on any listening activity is critical. When genuine concerns are raised be ready to respond and act. Even if it doesn’t seem meaningful to you as a manager or executive, jeans day, uniform requirements, and parking lot challenges may matter to your folks out there on the front lines.”

**Dr. Angela Pratt**

HR Director, Kellogg’s Frozen Foods and North America Marketing

“We are now in a world where more and more employees are demanding the same level of real-time interaction they experience in their personal lives. Technology has fundamentally changed the way we interact, which means the expectations of employees have changed as well. Employers need to move more towards tapping real-time employee driven concerns and be ready to act on those concerns quickly and decisively.”

**Dr. Jay Dorio**

Director of Employee Voice and Assessments, IBM Kenexa

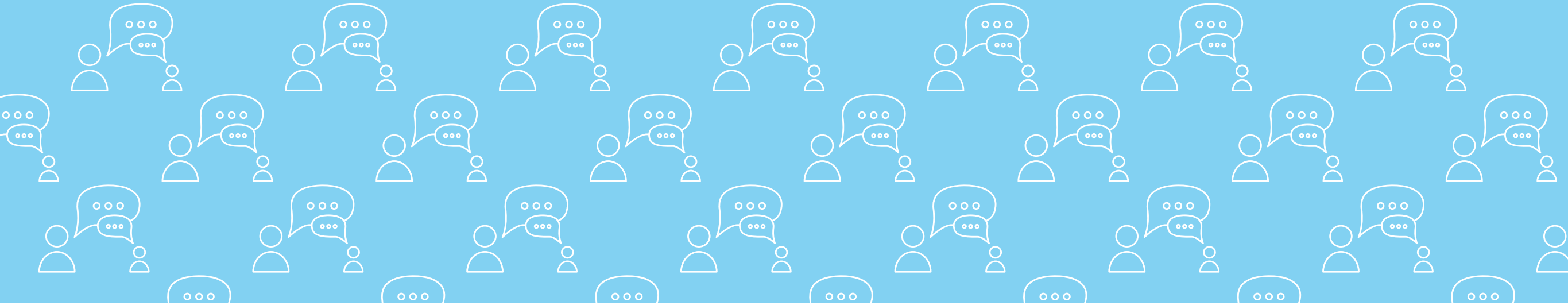
Employees are more willing than ever to share their opinions at work. But listening alone isn’t enough. Employees want and expect organizations to follow up on their input with meaningful, appropriate actions. Technology now allows you to translate the voice of the employee into actionable insights that help create a more engaged, productive and satisfied workforce.

But not everyone is as confident action will be taken on feedback % of employees confident positive change would result



IBM (2015) Amplifying Employee Voice: How Organizations Can Better Connect to Pulse of their Workforce





Learn more about how **IBM Kenexa Employee Voice** can help your organization listen to your workforce, analyze responses and act fast on insights to maximize employee performance.