



ANGELA SINICKAS

All research findings  
can be useful, even  
those from long since  
completed studies

## KEEPING FOCUS GROUP RESULTS EVERGREEN

Research from focus groups is valuable information that provides immediate feedback. So the results shouldn't be stored away and forgotten as they may prove useful for future issues that arise. Angela Sinickas highlights the importance of this by explaining a particularly successful method initiated by power generation company Alstom.

I've worked on many focus groups for clients, but only one of them, Alstom, in its power systems sector, has created a way of putting the findings to use long after the immediate need for them has been addressed.

Most internal focus group projects are "one-off." Management wants to know how employees feel about a topic, such as a major change initiative, benefits, or even how well communication is working. Usually the facilitator writes a report of findings, shares it with the management sponsors, and promptly files it away never to be seen or used again.

The company's focus groups are called "cafezinhos" (in Brazil, this translates as "welcome, let's talk") and were created by Alstom Power Systems' President, Philippe Joubert, in Brazil over 20 years ago.

Anne Guerin-Moens, Power Systems' senior vice president of change and communications, and her in-house change specialists have developed a process for mining the wealth of information generated from over 150 cafezinhos in the last two years. Some topics have been specific, but others are very broad to connect with employees' issues around the world. With over 25,000 employees in more than 70 countries, staying in touch is more important – and keeping track of the findings more difficult – than for the average-sized organization.

### Online tracking program

Alstom has automated every part of the cafezinhos process, other than the actual facilitation itself, through a customized program they built on Lotus Notes. As the need arises for a cafezinho anywhere in the world, the request is logged into the program. Potential participants are selected and invited online, and their acceptance or rejection is tracked. Similarly, if Alstom wants to use a local facilitator, that person's invitation and acceptance of the assignment is electronic.

### Creating the initial report

Once a cafezinho is completed, the findings are entered into the program's database in three categories:

- Statements about how employees perceive the issues being discussed.
- Questions asked by participants.
- Participants' recommendations for action.

The report generation function of the program then creates and distributes the initial report once the meeting is finished. But that's just the beginning of how the results are used.

Questions from the session are forwarded electronically to the person



Angela Sinickas, ABC, is president of Sinickas Communications, Inc., an international communication consultancy specializing in helping corporations achieve business results through targeted diagnostics and practical solutions. For more information visit: [www.sinicom.com](http://www.sinicom.com)

most likely to provide an answer, and these responses are then added to the database.

The recommendations are also forwarded to local or sector management, who are expected to reply either with an explanation of why the recommendation cannot or should not be considered, or a date by which either a decision about the recommendation will be made or the recommendation will be implemented. These responses and dates are also entered into the database. When deadlines come up, the managers are queried on each recommendation's status.

### The "final" report

From two to six months after an initial report is generated, the final report – including answers to all questions and the status of all recommendations – is sent to the original cafezinhos participants and all local and sector decision makers involved.

This information continues to be used long after the final report has been distributed. As the statements, questions and recommendations have all been entered as discrete pieces of information in a database, they can be retrieved at any time in the future and sorted by location, business unit, type of employee and, of course, by theme. Information is confidential, however, and statements remain anonymous.

Before Joubert visits any of the sector's sites, he receives a summary from the database of all the recent issues, questions and actions taken locally. By the time he arrives, he has a deep understanding of employees' thoughts and can use that information to tailor his presentations.

When he conducts face-to-face meetings with employees on site, he mentions issues raised during past cafezinhos, which helps participants realise that management is truly listening to them. Reviewing the database in advance also better prepares him for the questions he may hear.

As Guerin-Moens says, "We are convinced that a company is made successful by the ability of its management to listen to its people. The more willing you are to create a working environment based on transparency and trust, the easier it becomes to communicate with and engage your staff. Cafezinho is a very powerful management tool for that purpose." scm