

Conducting research with hard-to-reach employees

Identify the most suitable methods of research for different types of remote workers, to help get higher response rates and other added benefits.

by Angela Sinickas, President, Sinickas Communications Inc.

Hard-to-reach audiences aren't only a difficult communication challenge – they also present a tricky challenge when it comes to conducting research. Here's some advice for dealing with very different types of remote workers.

Provide a place to complete the survey

If you're doing survey research in a manufacturing environment, not only do participants need a paper survey – but they also need a place in which to complete the survey. In many such environments staff will not have their own personal space, as they might in an office-based role. Most manufacturing areas do not have desk space on which to put a piece of paper down. If you don't ever spend time there, this wouldn't occur to you – so just giving them the paper survey isn't enough – you've got to make sure they have a place with a table, whether it's a cafeteria or the HR department. Even getting a survey to randomly selected employees can be a challenge since manufacturing areas rarely have individual mailboxes.

Take advantage of shutdowns and downtime

Providing the space isn't the only concern. Time can be an important obstacle to completing a survey in an environment where each employee's time is fully committed to undertaking specific hands-on tasks. Most companies won't want to pay people overtime to stay longer at the end of their shift to complete a survey. But if you look at the different environments in a manufacturing setting, most will have an

occasional shut-down.

Plant managers and supervisors know they will have to allow for a short shut-down from time to time for minor maintenance tasks. For example, if the machinery isn't running smoothly, the supervisor will need to stop the line, perhaps to oil the equipment or change a part. The supervisor might have 15-30 minutes when only a few people are doing something and yet everyone is still being paid. If that's the environment in which you have to survey, try to work with the management in that plant.

Approach plant management to seek their cooperation by saying, "If next time there's any reason to shut down the line, this would be when we'd like you to have the supervisors take employees who aren't needed for the fix into the cafeteria. While they're off the line, we'd like these employees to fill in a survey." As a result you'll get a pretty good response rate and it's better than people standing around doing nothing.

Conduct the survey at a face-to-face event

Sometimes it's possible to piggy-back a survey on a regular face-to-face event, such as staff meetings or plant production meetings. Another thing I've seen work is in staff meetings – perhaps a plant meeting where they might have a weekly production get-together. People are already sitting at a conference table, and not standing on the line, so part of the meeting could be spent completing a survey.



Establish processes that protect anonymity

Communicators also need to pay attention to survey administration in manufacturing environments. Be careful in a group administration setting. When employees finish their surveys, they need to be able to put them into a sealed envelope and then have that sealed envelope put into a pile or package. This way they don't feel the supervisor is going to say "Oh, that's Joe's survey." Communicators need to advise supervisors very clearly about this aspect of survey management if the supervisor is the one who will be administering the survey.

Choose the right mode of delivery

Some remote workers are sales people who work out of their homes. They typically do have online access – access to the internet, company intranet and email. But the danger with those people is that we assume that they'd be happy to fill out a survey online. Communicators must recognize that field sales staff do not typically have online access during the work day, or perhaps have only a limited screen display via a hand-held device. Sales people are usually out seeing clients, traveling, or in waiting rooms before a meeting and so on. For these reasons they're far more likely to complete a paper survey while they're waiting to meet a customer. It isn't realistic for a researcher to expect sales staff to come home at the end of a long day, log in and spend another 15 to 20 minutes completing a survey online.

Some people who are working remotely may have online access, but this may not be the best way to get a good response rate, while others have no online access for work purposes. Such a group might include telephone engineers, cable TV technicians, or people operating in a geographically remote area such as gas pipeline workers.

Like sales personnel, these people may also need to receive a paper survey, but communicators should expect a somewhat lower response rate. For this reason, if conducting a random sample of the whole company, communicators should invite a larger proportion of remote workers to participate because fewer of them will ultimately respond.

Response data should be correctly weighted

Once the survey responses have been collated, communicators should review the proportions of the returns if the results are not to be skewed. Did you get the right proportion of people in your survey response? Did it match the proportion of those remote workers in the workforce? If it doesn't, then you need to weight the results; otherwise, you'll come up with a company average that's weighted too strongly in favor of the office people. Unweighted results will provide an inaccurate picture that will not reflect the reality for so many of those remote workers.

Circulate results to those who participated

You want to make sure that you get as good a response rate as you can – but then you have to acknowledge that it will be lower than in the office group. Once the responses come in, the communicator has to fix the imbalance by providing the correct weighting at this point – the back end of the survey process. But the communicator's job doesn't end there. Remember to get the results back out to the people who have participated. This means going beyond simply posting the results electronically on the company intranet and hoping everyone will log in.

This is true of all communication – you have to make sure that your communication system has a way of summarizing critical information that's online, in print if necessary, for those remote people. You can't assume that supervisors will pass that information on. They simply don't. You can expect it, but it doesn't happen.

Plan focus groups near other meetings

It's difficult to bring hard-to-reach groups together for a face-to-face focus group session – but it depends on who exactly the communicator is trying to collect in one place. For example, it's very hard to get sales people to attend a focus group because the sales team might only have one person in a

particular town, with the next person 60 miles away and the next miles further on. However, some of these sales teams meet in person a few times a year – at regional, national or global sales meetings. Find out the schedule for those types of meeting and get on their agenda. Then you can run focus groups for people while they're together.

Use the telephone for more probing research

One-to-one telephone interviews are another possibility for person-to-person research. That way you can probe more deeply during the interviews than just receiving the responses to be read in a written form. One-on-one interviews can sometimes take less time because in a focus group you're waiting for five or six people to respond, whereas in an interview each person is just answering each question once. On the other hand, if you were to do several one-to-one interviews, these might take longer than a small focus group. Communicators need to balance the in-depth quality of what they will get from a telephone interview versus the time that they will need to put into gathering the responses.

Focus groups have hidden pros and cons

Remote blue-collar workers are much harder to bring into a focus group, but it can still be done. It just takes a lot of commitment from the company. We're proposing to do some focus groups for a company that has people working on a pipeline in a very remote place. The company has regional offices where the HR people work, so there are some conference rooms. But we know that the company is going to have to pay people, not only for being in the focus group but also for their driving time and their expenses.

The effort of bringing remote workers to a focus group session often has other side benefits. Those employees tend to be so grateful that their opinions are being heard that the process has a positive halo effect long afterwards. Remote workers attending a focus

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group might typically say, "Hey, you wouldn't believe it – management actually called me in for my opinion. And they really listened." Word will usually spread well beyond the people who are actually participating in the focus group, suggesting to these employees that management is really committed to seeking their views.

Understand each specific audience

Researching hard-to-reach employees will continue to be a challenge for communicators as management want to develop a better understanding of the different motivations all their employee groups have – even those that might make up a small proportion of the total number of employees.

In response, communicators need to become much more creative in their research approaches to reach these employees. Communicators need to better understand each specific hard-to-reach group so that they can improve their appreciation of the nature of the work these people are doing. Only in this way will communicators begin to see what is possible in terms of the research process – its preparation, administration, management and communication. You need to do some research with the managers who work with these people because they may have better ideas than you could come up with on your own.

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