Destatis' experience in conducting staff opinion surveys

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1. Introduction

Staff satisfaction surveys at the Federal Statistical Office of Germany (Destatis) have their origin in quality management. The aim of establishing a comprehensive quality management has been pursued within the context of the EFQM model (European Foundation for Quality Management) since the late 1990s. "Staff results" is one vital aspect of the corresponding nine EFQM-criteria and staff satisfaction surveys are suitable to deliver relevant insights, e.g. in how the staff members perceive the institution. The high quality of the statistical products and services depends on the commitment of all employees. Therefore, an important strategic goal of Destatis is to enhance motivation, qualification and thus satisfaction of all employees.

The measurement of staff satisfaction is a very useful tool to identify strengths and weaknesses in the management of the organisation from the viewpoint of the staff. The aim of the Destatis survey is to assess staff satisfaction with their physical work environment, the conditions of work, the relations to superiors and to Destatis as an employer, the team situation and staff perspectives of advancement possibilities. The results of the survey are taken into account for human resource development strategies of the institution and for improvement measures concerning the physical work environment.

The current paper will describe the organisation, management and implementation of staff satisfaction surveys at Destatis as well as Destatis' measures to react on the results of the staff.

2. The staff satisfaction survey at Destatis

2.1. History and context of staff satisfaction surveys at Destatis

In 2003, Destatis developed their first human resources development concept. One module was dedicated to the enhancement of staff satisfaction combined with the requirement of conducting staff satisfaction surveys on a regular basis. As a consequence, the President, the Vice-President and the Heads of Department advanced and promoted the idea of staff satisfaction surveys at Destatis. The first one was conducted in 2005 and it has ever since been regarded as a leadership and steering tool. The main target is to use the results for a systematic improvement of qualification, leadership, and cooperation. In 2007 and 2009, the staff satisfaction survey was repeated so that changes over time could be observed and evaluated.

2.2. *Questionnaire design*

The list of questions in 2007 and 2009 was mainly based on the first paper-and-pencil-questionnaire of 2005, as smallest modifications may limit the comparability of results over time. However, changes in the organisation need to be reflected in the data collection instrument. Thus, several questions were added, for example regarding the follow-up measures of the previous staff satisfaction survey. Some adaptations took place after testing the online questionnaire in 2007 for comprehensibility and usability. Altogether, the questionnaire currently contains about 80 questions referring to the following categories:

- Statistical information
- Overall satisfaction
- Working conditions and workplace
- Follow-up measures of the previous staff satisfaction survey
- Work and work content
- Information and strategic goals
- Qualification and possibilities for further development
- Cooperation within department, division, section, and working area
- Assessment of the direct supervisor
- Federal Statistical Office as an employer

Except for statistical information, all questions are to be answered on a five-point-scale (strongly agree / agree / partly agree, partly disagree / disagree / strongly disagree). In the final reports, however, results are presented on a three-point-scale (agree / partly agree, partly disagree / disagree) for reasons of simplification.

2.3. *Implementation aspects*

Before conducting a staff satisfaction survey, all relevant decision makers have to be informed and involved. Especially before the first round, many questions had to be answered, for example: Do we plan and conduct the survey ourselves or do we need external help? Do we collect data by using a paper-and-pencil or an online questionnaire? What kind of questions are worth asking?

For all three rounds of the staff satisfaction survey, a project team was founded, consisting of employees from different backgrounds, functions, departments and interest groups (e.g. staff council, equal opportunity commissioner, and representative body for disabled employees). The team meetings are held by the internal unit “Institute for Research and Development in Federal Statistics” that is also in charge of organising and conducting the survey as well as analysing its results. In 2005, the project team was supported by an external advisor who is highly experienced in the field of staff satisfaction surveys. The main tasks of this project team were the design of the questionnaire (2005) and the revision of the questionnaire (2007, 2009), the decision on the reporting system, the discussion and the interpretation of results, as well as the identification of fields of actions for improvement. Each meeting of the project team was accompanied by intranet information for all employees. Furthermore, the President and the Vice-President were constantly informed about the progress.

Whether a “prognosis” questionnaire shall be conducted among superiors or not, is to be decided at the first project team meeting (roughly six months before the staff satisfaction survey). This “prognosis” questionnaire addresses the President, the Vice-President, the Heads of Department, and (since 2009) the Heads of Divisions who are asked to estimate the results of their own staff in advance. It enables them to compare their own expectations concerning the results with the perception of their employees. So far, the “prognosis” questionnaire has been a paper-and-pencil questionnaire containing the most relevant and all new questions (approximately 20 selected items).

Table 1 gives an overview of important dates for conducting staff satisfaction surveys at Destatis. It reflects the phases of decision making, preparation, information, data collection and all subsequent processes. Before the timeline starts (i.e. before the official decision for a staff satisfaction survey), a preliminary but elaborated calculation of costs has to be provided, ideally based on the experience of the previous year.

Table 1: Timeline of important dates for staff satisfaction surveys at Destatis

Planning and preparation	
t-7m	decision of the President, the Vice-President and the Heads of department for conducting a staff survey
t-5m	first meeting of the project team
t-4m	start of programming the online questionnaire
t-2m	pretest
t-1m	advance notice on the intranet for all employees
t-2w	second meeting of the project team
t-1w	distribution of posters and flyers, information on the intranet
Data collection	
t-1w	“prognosis” questionnaire
t until t+2w	field work, current information on the intranet, possibly information desks
Data processing and analysis	
Interpretation, publication, and preparation of subsequent processes	
t+6w	first discussion of results
t+2m	third meeting of the project team
t+3m	workshop for the President, the Vice-President and the Heads of department; presentations for the Heads of Divisions and employees
Reactions/actions and evaluation	

t = time of inquiry, m = month, w = week

Description of the survey and rules

The staff satisfaction survey at Destatis is a complete count. In 2005, a paper-and-pencil survey was conducted. In 2007 and 2009, an online questionnaire was provided, however, paper forms were made available on demand for disabled employees or employees without access to computers. Thus, all active and present staff members of Destatis were enabled to participate in the survey (roughly 2,500 employees). The participation was voluntary.

The confidential handling of individual data is essential for the willingness of staff members to participate in the survey. This especially applies to organizations that collect and analyze the data themselves without external help. Different measures serve the purpose of data protection:

- It is not asked for the name of the respondent. Each staff member receives a user name and a password, which are distributed randomly and are therefore not connected to the person’s name.
- Data are only published for reference groups of at least 8 respondents.

- All people within the IT section and at the Institute for Research and Development who have access to individual data sign a declaration of confidentiality. This group of people is kept as small as possible.
- It has to be clear from the beginning for which purposes the information of the survey will be used, meaning that they should not be used for other purposes ex post. This requires a sound discussion beforehand regarding the analysis of data and the reporting system.

Processing and data analysis

The reporting system should be discussed and defined within the project team: The more detailed the definition of the reporting system, the fewer questions will arise during the processing phase. So far, reports have been generated for Destatis on the whole, for departments and for divisions. These reports contain tables as well as bar charts, generally encompassing comparisons over time and comparisons with the superior organisational unit. For Destatis on the whole, all results (also analysed according to sites, gender and status) are provided on the intranet. In the other cases each organisational unit receives their report via e-mail.

Advertising and information

For each staff satisfaction survey, an own key visual and slogan were developed and printed on flyers, posters and give-aways (e.g. pens). Posters were displayed at central points one week before the survey started. Furthermore, flyers were sent to all employees three days in advance informing them in detail about the upcoming event. On the first day of fieldwork, a letter by the President was sent to all employees as well as a give-away (so far, either pens or post-its) as a motivator and reminder.

Information desks are especially useful during the first staff satisfaction survey. They offer the opportunity of asking project team members questions about the survey. The aim is to inform about data protection and confidentiality.

Regarding the intranet, there are different possibilities to use it as an information tool which have to be considered in advance. In 2009, Destatis established an own website on the intranet which could be reached by a long-term link. Furthermore, employees were continuously informed about project team meetings and other news related to the survey. During the data collection period, the preliminary total response rate was displayed and up-dated each day. Every two days, response rates for each department were published to raise participation.

On the whole, information about the results of the survey is communicated top-down, starting with the President, the Vice-President and the Heads of Department at a workshop. Furthermore, all employees are to be informed via intranet about the available results for Destatis on the whole as soon as possible. Within the divisions, it is the responsibility of their heads to discuss the results with their staff in order to develop follow-up measures (bottom-up-approach). In addition to the reports, the President publishes a cover letter communicating the top-priority fields of action on the intranet.

2.4. Follow-up process in 2009

At Destatis, the follow-up process was organised by the Human Resources Department after the presentation of the results was carried out in a top-down-approach by the Institute for Research and Development.

In 2009, there were two ways of deducing follow-up measures from the survey results:

First, potential for improvement was identified that affects most employees in the same or at least in a similar way. This potential of improvement was subject to discussion on the top management level using a top-down approach (President, Vice President, and Heads of Divisions, supported by Human Resources). Measures that arose from discussions on this level are, for example, the (re-)introduction of a feedback to superiors by their subordinates in order to gain a better insight into leadership habits at Destatis, finally aiming at further improving leadership behaviour. Furthermore, regular meetings between the President and different groups of employees will be organised in order to encourage a deepened communication. Moreover, future staff satisfaction surveys will be conducted in four-year intervals (alternating with the feedback to superiors by their subordinates), as the measures of enhancement based on the survey results need more time to unfold and to make effects observable.

Second, fields of action identified from the survey results that affect only certain divisions or sections were discussed in a bottom-up-approach. This aims at developing specific measures for the respective units in order to improve staff satisfaction. In a next step, the President and the Vice-President discussed the staff satisfaction survey results and the proposed measures of the departments and divisions with their respective heads. Afterwards, all superiors were asked to hand in an overview of their measures to the Controlling section (all in all, 121 individual measures, mainly considering the field of communication). From time to time, the implementation of these measures will be observed by the Controlling section.

3. Conclusions

The follow-up-measures after the publication of the results are essential for the reputation of a staff satisfaction survey. Once asked for their opinion, staff members expect that measures will be taken to enhance the work conditions, the work environment, workflows or the like where necessary. If the results are not taken seriously by the management, staff members will lose their trust in the instrument itself which might finally be penalised by decreasing response rates in the future.

All in all, staff satisfaction surveys require a high amount of preparation in order to achieve the established goals. They do, however, offer a great deal of potential with regard to human resources development. Once weaknesses of an organisation are identified, they can be overcome by developing and implementing purposive measures and instruments.