THE NHS STAFF SURVEY: METHODS FOR IMPROVING ONLINE RESPONSE RATES

NHS STAFF SURVEY COORDINATION CENTRE

1   Introduction

The Coordination Centre has consulted with organisations that have run the NHS Staff Survey online, and we have identified some of the key areas that led to the successful implementation of the survey. Please note that these "best practice" guidelines should be used in conjunction with the "Improving Response Rates" document which goes in to the general survey processes in more detail.

2   Pre-survey Preparation

Pre-approach letters/emails

Pre-approach letters/emails are used to boost response rates by letting respondents know that they have been invited to take part in a survey. The pre-approach letter/email can be used to inform staff about the survey 1–2 weeks before the first mailing. It also explains the motivation for running the survey, any incentive schemes that are being offered and highlights that the survey is reported anonymously.

Communications

It is important to send out pre-survey communications which highlight that the survey will be arriving by email and not paper. If staff are expecting paper questionnaires they may ignore the link to the survey in their inbox. If a mixed mode survey is being implemented it is important to inform staff that some staff will receive paper questionnaires.

Email subject title and sender address

Organisations and contractors are encouraged to carefully consider the subject lines used for all of the emails sent to staff. It is important to make sure these are easily understood by staff. Possible subject lines include: *NHS Staff Survey*, or *[Organisation Name] Staff Survey*, or *NHS Staff Survey: Invitation.* Similarly, it is important to consider the email address from which the survey gets sent to staff, because if this does not look relevant, some staff may not open the email.

It is recommended that organisations confirm the subject line and sender email address with their contractor prior to the start of the survey, and that internal communications notify staff of these, so that they know what to expect.

Clean/generate staff email addresses

In order for the online survey to be successful, email addresses must be cleaned and updated in advance of the survey. If the link goes to unused or deactivated email addresses, staff will not be able to access the survey. Running an online survey is an opportunity to generate email addresses for staff who haven't previously been on email lists. You should aim to make your email lists as comprehensive as possible prior to the start of the survey and set up email addresses for staff who do not have one.

Inform staff about incentive schemes

Incentive schemes are permitted for the NHS Staff Survey and can be a very effective way to engage staff. Successful incentive schemes often include an assortment of prizes (e.g. meal/shopping vouchers), donating money to charity for each completed survey or a cash prize. The most successful schemes are often tied to response rates e.g. as the response rates go up the prizes get more desirable or more money is donated to charity. Online surveys allow response rates to be tracked very effectively and some organisations have linked online response rates to their incentive scheme. For example, a pot of prize money could increase as the response rate goes up across the

organisation. This may persuade staff to respond more quickly and result in a higher response rate.

3   During fieldwork

Communication

Online surveys are easier and quicker to track compared to paper surveys and this can put organisations using the online mode at an advantage. Some organisations have found that communicating current response rates to staff (at team or department level) makes them feel more invested in the survey and drives up response rates. A number of trusts use internal communications as an opportunity for staff to give their views on the Staff Survey – e.g. by using staff stories in their communications looking at why the survey is important for the NHS. Communications directly from the CEO can also serve to highlight the importance of the survey; the best communication strategies draw on local and organisation level communications. Communications can also be directed to areas where response rates are low.

Competition between departments and teams

Aggressive competition may alienate and discourage staff, however many organisations have found that healthy competition (tied to response rates) between teams and departments can boost overall response rates. If staff are aware that they are lagging behind other parts of the organisation then they will often try to catch up. Conversely, departments in the lead may feel rewarded.

Provide time/areas for staff to complete the survey

Staff should be allowed to complete the survey in work time and provisions should be made for staff who do not have routine access to a computer. This is particularly important for allowing front line staff to participate in the online survey. If particular staff groups have poor access to computers then facilities should be provided for them to complete the survey. A common approach is to book out computer rooms/IT facilities for specific periods so they are dedicated to the Staff Survey.

4   Post fieldwork

Follow-up with staff about incentives and response rates

Communicate the result of the incentive scheme and use it as an opportunity to do presentations, roadshows and workshops to raise the profile of the survey within the organisation. Circulate the final response rates and congratulate everyone who participated in the survey.

Disseminate results

Circulate final results to staff at an organisation and directorate level if possible. Let staff know what the positive and less positive areas were across the organisation along with some ideas or a plan of how the issues will be tackled. Keep staff updated with action plans and continue to involve them in Staff Survey related issues throughout the year.

5   Key points

- Make staff aware that the survey is due to arrive via email.
- Engage staff in the survey process e.g. with response rate updates, incentive schemes, staff stories and organisational plans.
- Disseminate results of the online survey to staff along with appropriate actions.

6   Further information

The NHS Staff Survey website is www.nhsstaffsurveys.com. Here, you can find all the survey documentation, as well as a page of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about the survey.

If you would like any further information about the NHS Staff Survey, this is available from the Coordination Centre.

- 01865 208 141 (9.30am – 4.30pm, Monday to Friday).
- nhsstaffsurvey@surveycoordination.com