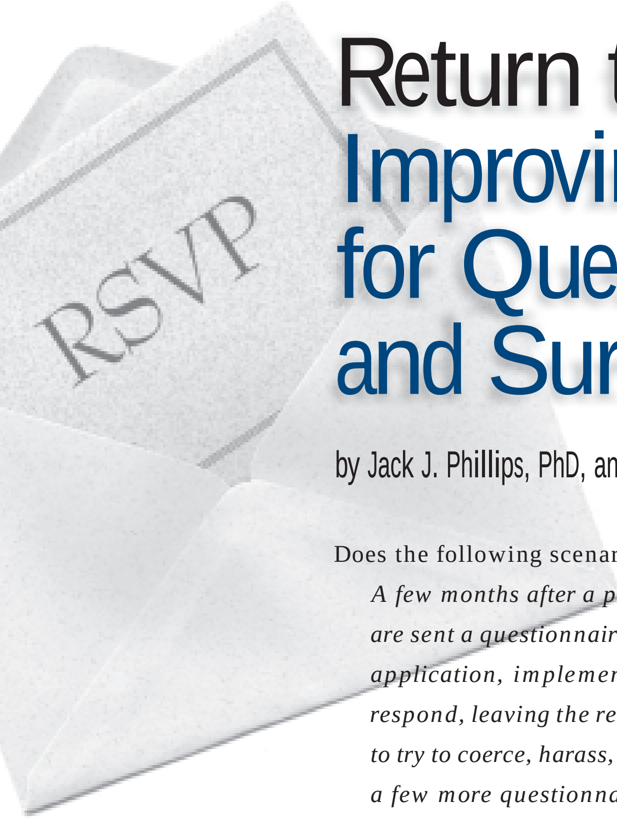

Return to Sender
Improving Response Rates for Questionnaires and Surveys

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Does the following scenario sound familiar?

> *A few months after a performance improvement project is completed, participants are sent a questionnaire designed to collect data about results. These data include application, implementation, and impact. Unfortunately, only a small number respond, leaving the results of the project in question. Additional efforts are made to try to coerce, harass, and even threaten participants to provide data, only to have a few more questionnaires trickle in.*

This scenario is not unusual. When evaluating performance improvement projects, a key challenge in data collection is obtaining the desired response rate. In our work, which spans several hundred impact studies, we have been able to consistently obtain response rates in the 60%–90% range, achieving as high as 95% for an anonymous 11-page e-mail survey for senior managers. Occasionally, captive audiences respond at the 100% level. The key is to develop techniques that can be applied routinely, consistently, and thoroughly each time a questionnaire is used as the data-collection method. This article presents 25 techniques that have proven to be successful in our experience of building the response rate.

The Challenge

Unfortunately, internal response rates for questionnaires and surveys in an organization are notoriously low. Based on input from hundreds of participants in our workshops, as well as the experience of our consulting clients, the average response rates are in the 10%–25% range. In a recent workshop, one participant said that if they achieve a 30% response rate, they would consider the project successful. When evaluating small groups, such low response levels can spell disaster. The return rate plays a considerable role in terms of the validity of the results and the actual payoff, particularly if a return on investment (ROI) evaluation is explored. Although there are many ways to collect data—such as observation, interviews, focus groups, and monitoring performance records—experience indicates that the questionnaire is one of the most versatile, efficient, and often-used follow-up evaluation tools. It is also the default data-collection method in many projects, under the assumption that if other data-collection methods are not feasible, the questionnaire is simple to implement.

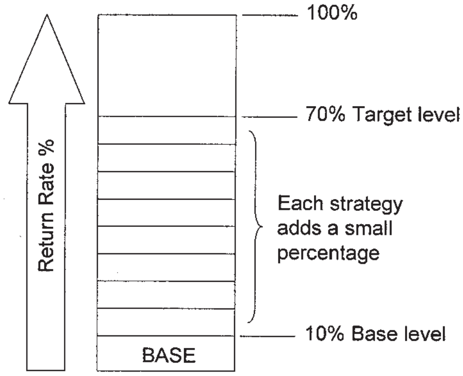

Figure 1. Return Rate Possibilities.

Figure 1 illustrates how compiling strategies helps obtain the desired response rate. A certain base number of returns will usually be realized. This base number of respondents typically represents the dedicated, loyal individuals who will step up to the challenge and provide data, often regardless of how poorly the questionnaire is designed or administered. Unfortunately, when the baseline response is small, the challenge of building from this base is substantial. Each technique described in this article will add a few percentage points. The desired response rate is the rate in which a credible reporting of results can be accomplished. Not having data hampers efforts to demonstrate the success of projects in that "no data" is most commonly interpreted as "no improvement."

The 25 techniques suggested here require discipline, and to achieve the desired rates, these techniques should be considered each time a questionnaire is administered. The techniques are arranged in three categories: prior to, during, and after administration of the questionnaire. These techniques represent a compilation of techniques recommended by thousands of workshop participants as well as survey experts, including Dillman (2000), Alreck and Settle (1995), and Fink (2003a, 2003b). These techniques can be considered when administering questionnaires for small group evaluations as well as major research projects.

The Techniques

Before Administration

1. Make the Questionnaire as Simple as Possible. While a simple questionnaire does not always provide the full scope of data necessary for analysis, simplification of the instrument should always be pursued. When the total scope of the questionnaire is finalized and questions are developed, every effort should be made to keep it as simple and brief as possible. Asking only questions that provide useful information is one way to simplify the questionnaire

2. Design for a Professional Appearance. Sloppy, unattractive questionnaires will not attract attention or generate a response. Questionnaires must be attractive, professionally prepared, and efficient in design—communicating a serious and professional request.

3. Simplify the Response Process. The process of responding should be as easy as possible. If appropriate, a self-addressed stamped envelope should be included. E-mail or web-based systems might also be used for response in some situations. For situations in which the questionnaire is completed and returned on site, a response drop box can be provided near the workstation.

4. Consider a Pilot Test. One of the best ways to ensure that the questionnaire is designed properly, the questions flow adequately, and the questions are clear and specific is to test the questionnaire with representatives of the target group. This better ensures the validity of the questionnaire. Pilot testing can be accomplished quickly with a small sample, and results can be revealing. It is essential to have a representative from the target audience to review the questions, issues, and flow of questions in order to provide formative feedback for revision of the instrument prior to full implementation.

5. Consider Anonymous Input. Anonymous data are often more objective and sometimes more free flowing. If participants believe that their input is anonymous, they will typically be more constructive and candid in their feedback. Anonymous questionnaires often result in higher response rates than those in which the respondent can be identified.

6. Communicate to Respondents How Long It Will Take to Complete the Questionnaire. Although this is a simple issue, participants need to have a realistic understanding of how long it will take them to respond to the questionnaire. A pilot test should provide the information needed to allocate time for the response.

7. Provide Advance Communication. If appropriate and feasible, participants should receive advance communications about the requirement for completion of the questionnaire. This action minimizes some of the resistance, provides an opportunity to explain in more detail the circumstances surrounding the evaluation, and positions the follow-up evaluation as an integral part of the program, not an add-on activity. In a recent research project, comments from respondents suggested that they would have thrown away the questionnaire had they not been notified about it ahead of time (Phillips, 2003).

During the Administration

8. Communicate the Purpose. Participants should understand the reason for the questionnaire, including who or what has initiated this specific evaluation. This clarifies any concerns they have for providing the information.

Participants should know if the evaluation is part of a systematic process or a program's special request for information. Participants involved in any type of evaluation or survey research respond more willingly if they know why they are being asked and what is in it for them. Even in the most controlled research environment, disclosing the purpose is almost always necessary (Fink, 2003a, 2003b).

9. Identify the Individuals Who Will See the Data. It is important for participants to know who will see the data and how the data will be used. If the questionnaire is anonymous, it should clearly be communicated to participants what steps will be taken to ensure anonymity. Participants should know if senior executives are to see the combined results of the study.

10. Describe the Data-Integration Process. Participants should understand how the questionnaire results are to be combined with other data, if applicable. The questionnaire may be only one of the data-collection methods used. Participants should know how the data are weighted and integrated in the final report.

11. Have an Executive Sign the Introductory Letter. Participants are typically interested in knowing who sponsored, sanctioned, or supported the questionnaire. For maximum effectiveness, a senior executive responsible for a major area where the participants work should draft and sign a letter of introduction. If possible, this letter should be personalized (for example, using a mail merge function of a word processing system). Employees may be more willing to provide thoughtful responses for a senior executive than for a member of the performance improvement staff.

12. Let the Participants Know They Are Part of the Sample. If appropriate, participants should know that they are part of a carefully selected sample from a larger population and that their input will be used to inform decisions about a much larger audience. This action often appeals to a sense of responsibility so participants provide usable, accurate data.

13. Use Local Manager Support. Local managerial involvement can be critical to response rate success. Managers can distribute the questionnaires themselves, make reference to the questionnaire in staff meetings, follow up to see if questionnaires have been completed, and show the support for completing the questionnaire. This direct manager support will lead some participants to respond more accurately.

14. Review the Questionnaire During the Program or Project Being Evaluated. Participants need to understand the questionnaire as much as possible. It is important for them to see a copy before the actual evaluation implementation. Ideally, the questionnaire should be distributed and reviewed during the performance improvement project implementation. Each question should be briefly discussed, and any issues or concerns about the questions need to be clarified. While pilot testing can help, the participants in the pilot are often not the exact participant group. Hence, a clear understanding of questions and the evaluation process is necessary when a comprehensive evaluation is conducted. This not only helps the response rate but also improves the quality and quantity of data.

15. Consider Incentives. While various incentives can be effective, they are usually grouped into three categories. First, an incentive can be provided in exchange for the completed questionnaire. For example, if participants return the questionnaire personally or through the mail, they could receive a small gift, such as a mouse pad or coffee mug, or be entered into a drawing for a larger gift. If anonymity is of concern to respondents, a neutral third party can provide the incentive.

The second category of incentives tends to induce guilt for not responding. Examples are one US dollar (or equivalent currency) clipped to the questionnaire or a pen enclosed in the envelope. Participants are asked to "take the money, buy a beverage, and fill out the questionnaire," or to "please use this pen to complete the questionnaire."

A third category of incentives is designed to obtain a quick response. This approach is based on the assumption that a quick response will ensure a greater response rate. If an individual puts off completing the questionnaire, the odds of completing it diminish considerably. The initial group of participants may receive a more expensive gift or they may be entered into a drawing for an incentive. For example, in one study involving 72 managerial participants, the first 25 returned questionnaires were placed in a drawing for a $500 credit card gift certificate. The next 25 were added to the first 25 for another drawing for the same amount, but with lower odds of winning. After the first 50, there was no incentive. The longer a participant waits, the lower the odds for winning become.

16. Consider a Captive Audience. One of the best ways to achieve a high response rate is to consider a captive audience. In a followup session, a preplanned meeting, or just a session designed to collect data, participants meet and provide input, usually in the first few minutes of the meeting. Sometimes a routine meeting (such as a sales, technology, or management meeting) provides ample setting to collect the data. This approach is ideal in a followup training program that is a continuation in a series of the one being evaluated.

17. Communicate the Timing of Data Collection and Analysis. Provide participants with specific deadlines for providing data. They also need to know whether they will receive the results of the study and when to expect those findings. The best approach is to provide the exact date when the last questionnaires will be accepted, the date when the analysis is complete, the date that they will receive the results of the study, and the date the client will receive the results. Specific timing builds more respect for data collection and analysis.

18. Select the Appropriate Medium. The communication medium for the survey (whether paper based, web based, or e-mail) should match the culture of the target group, not necessarily be selected for the convenience of the evaluator. Sometimes an alternative response media can be permitted. The important issue is to make sure that it is suitable for the audience.

After Administration

19. Personalize the Process, if Possible. Participants are more likely to respond to personal messages and requests. A personal phone call can work well as a followup reminder to encourage participation. The personal touch brings appropriate sincerity and responsibility to the process.

20. Use Follow-up Reminders. A follow-up reminder should be sent one week after the questionnaire is received and another one week later. Depending on the questionnaire and the situation, these times can be adjusted. In still other situations, a third follow-up may be warranted. Sometimes, the media used to send the different follow-ups should vary. For example, a questionnaire may be sent through regular mail, whereas the first follow-up reminder is a paper-based memo from the immediate manager and a second follow-up reminder is sent by e-mail.

21. Treat Responses With Confidentiality. Confidentiality is an important part of the process. A confidentiality statement should be included, indicating that a participant's name will not be revealed to anyone other than the data collectors and analysts. In some cases, it may be appropriate to identify specifically who will see and work with the raw data. In addition, the specific steps taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data should be described. For example, when introducing an evaluation to a group of information assurance specialists, we ensured the group that their results were being held by the evaluator exclusively and that once the results were developed, the original questionnaires would be destroyed.

22. Send a Copy of the Results to the Participants. Participants should receive a copy of the study or at least a summary if they respond. This promise will often increase the response rate, as some individuals want to see the results of the entire group with their input. More importantly, the promise should be kept. In a conversation with a group of program participants, there was unanimous agreement that they had never seen the results of any survey administered in their organization. These participants indicated that this fact was a motivation to just go down the list of questions and check any box.

23. Show How Results Were Used. If feasible, respondents should be provided information about how the results were used to drive performance improvement. Respondents need to know if their input made a difference in a specific decision.

24. Use a Competitive Spirit. Sometimes it may be appropriate and feasible to use a competitive challenge to increase responses. When different divisions, regions, or departments are identified, early response rates may be communicated to leaders in these areas to create competition among the groups. This can be leveraged to create competition to respond.

25. Provide an Update. In some cases, it may be appropriate to provide an update on current responses as well as a progress report regarding the entire project. While this may be appropriate for large projects, it is still helpful for the individuals to understand how other performers are doing. Sometimes this creates subtle incentive and a reminder to provide data.

Some of you may be asking, "Do I have to do all this?" In response we ask, "Why wouldn't you want to?" The techniques are easy and inexpensive. A checklist is an easy way to keep track of the technique (see Figure 2).

Some may be concerned that an organization may not allow monetary incentives—there are other options such as mugs, a dinner out, or t-shirts. A very simple incentive is a copy of the results. Another concern may be a fear of tainting results

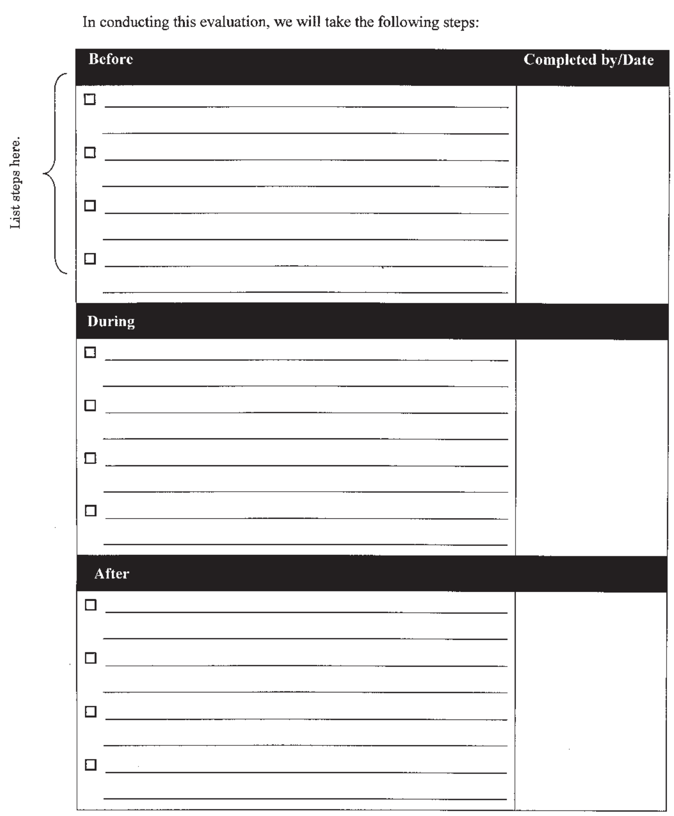

Figure 2. Questionnaire Administration Plan Checklist.

by explaining the purpose of the evaluation or introducing the questionnaire too early in the process. While we are concerned about introducing test questions prior to a learning event (and participants subsequently learning of the test), introducing a questionnaire to a group involved in a performance improvement initiative only helps the entire process. This reinforces the importance of the project; it also reinforces the expectation that change is desired.

Guiding Principles

When using these techniques, certain guiding principles should be followed to ensure that the data-collection process is consistently and properly implemented. Collectively, these techniques can boost response rates on follow-up questionnaires. Based on our experience with hundreds of studies, using all of them can result in a 60%-80% response rate, even with lengthy questionnaires that might take an hour to complete. The following guiding principles must be applied and used in concert with the techniques.

- Select methods that are feasible, using at least 15 of them. For most organizations, all of these methods are feasible. Using some of them may require stretching the typical mindset—some evaluators eliminate certain techniques before trying them. For example, some may feel that senior executives do not want to be involved in their project and thus will not ask executives to sign off on a memo or letter to be included with the questionnaire. In practice, most senior executives will get involved if it is easy for them to do so and if it adds value to the organization.
- Use follow-up questionnaires selectively, sampling in two ways. First, not all performance improvement projects should be evaluated using follow-up questionnaires. Follow-up evaluation should be reserved for programs that are expensive, expansive, have a long life cycle, and represent high-profile initiatives. Second, during a particular project, it may be desirable to sample only a few participants. Only a few learning and development programs should have follow-up evaluation with questionnaires. Of those selected, only a small group of participants should be involved unless there is a desire to have large numbers in the analysis. The important point is that keeping the sampling small enables the researchers to focus directly on the smaller group and does not necessarily overburden the participants.
- Make the data-collection process important and meaningful. The respondents need to understand your questionnaire is an important event—not just "another questionnaire" received from nondescript sources in the organization. Using most of the strategies in this article at the same time positions questionnaires for impact as an important, unique process designed to generate results.
- Position data collection as an integral part of the program, not an add-on activity. Participants should expect and anticipate the questionnaire. This issue is often a paradigm shift for some researchers who prefer to surprise people in data collection, much like an auditor. This approach can inhibit the quality of data and candid input. Advanced notice, including expectations, does not necessarily alter the data; rather it improves the quality and quantity of the data.
- Approach the process with determination and discipline. After the feasible techniques are selected, it is important to stay focused on using all the techniques each time to obtain the desired response rates. We are often asked how we can achieve an 80% response rate in an organization that routinely has response rates less than 20%. The answer to that question is "discipline." We work the 25 strategies each time, rather than entering evaluation projects with a predetermined mindset that they will not work in an organization. The majority of these methods are feasible within any organization and will produce the desired results.

Conclusion

Response rates are critical for any evaluation strategy. Response rates of 60%-80% can be realized when the 25 techniques suggested in this article are used and the guiding principles followed. The checklist in Figure 2 may be helpful to achieve the desired focus and results with questionnaire data collection. Good luck!

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