The NHS Staff Survey provides a range of data on the experience of staff, and includes data designed to be used at local level. It is an essential measure of ongoing staff engagement/cultural change. However, its results should be looked at alongside information collected from other sources.

This briefing offers tips on how to make most effective use of this information and has been developed around discussions with a range of trusts in order to help support local approaches.
NHS Staff Survey data – only part of the picture

The NHS Staff Survey has been designed with input from leading academics and is considered a highly reliable tool. However, most NHS organisations now have a wide range of sources for measuring staff experience, on top of the NHS Staff Survey. These can include locally designed surveys, the Staff Friends and Family Test, and discussions within local partnership bodies. NHS Staff Survey data should complement the other information a trust has, and if other channels are working well the results of the survey should not be a surprise.

Questions in the NHS Staff Survey may differ from local surveys. The national survey mostly uses multiple choice questions to seek quantitative data, which provides useful information on staff mood at a particular point in time. However, this does not provide reasoning for why staff answer the way they do. Because of this knowledge gap, local surveys and tools may provide more information and give a better understanding of particular answers. This can all help to paint a much fuller picture of staff mood and provide a starting point for actions to tackle concerns.

The national survey asks for some free text comments, which can be a very helpful source of information on staff opinion and can be broken down by area. The greater the degree of breakdown by area that can be given to local managers, the more useful comments are likely to be. The free text comments are also a vital source of data on wider organisational issues. They can bring out concerns not covered in other areas of the survey and give deeper understanding of how staff are feeling and the reasons for their views.

The NHS Staff Survey may generate different results to other surveys on some questions. For example, the national survey may have different definitions for bullying and harassment or violence. The NHS Staff Survey asks staff if they believe they have been subject to any incident of bullying, harassment and abuse, whereas other surveys may use a much narrower definition of bullying. Any differences between data from other surveys and the national survey should be looked at carefully. It is wise to consider these definitions to see if local surveys can dig deeper into specific issues and offer more detailed information where an organisation has concerns, such as workplace bullying between staff.

Data from the NHS Staff Survey should also be checked against other sources of workforce information, such as sickness absence and vacancy statistics. There may be correlations between staff opinion on key issues, poor staff engagement and higher than average absence levels. Data on intention to leave may correlate with leaving rates, though it is not considered a good individual predictor of leaving.

Top tips:

— Check NHS Staff Survey data against local survey data, which will help you to dig deeper into specific issues.

— Correlate national survey data with workforce information.
Theme and question data

The NHS Staff Survey results are now organised around broad themes such as health and wellbeing, rather than multiple key findings. This should help organisations to link data from the survey more effectively to their overall workforce approach.

Each theme is made up of results from a group of individual questions, so it is important to look at the results of individual questions, as overall theme scores may not show trends on important individual topics. For example, overall theme scores on bullying and harassment may not reflect distinctions between tackling bullying by patients/relatives and bullying between staff. Data on individual questions can be analysed by demographic and occupational group. For example, overall data on equality indicators is fairly high, whereas analysis of individual responses on Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES)/Workforce Disability Equality Standard (WDES) criteria demonstrates significant inequities. This segmentation allows organisations to investigate and resolve areas of concern.

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Top tip:
— Look at data both as themes and as individual questions to help identify trends.

Using benchmark and directorate data

The NHS Staff Survey centre provides all participating organisations with a report that includes overall benchmarking data. This is relevant to understand how similar organisations compare with each other. The report also contains directorate data, which may be more useful for understanding internal performance. Almost all organisations have a range of scores across departments and the directorate data will show where the highest and lowest scoring areas are.

Directorate-level responses should be analysed systematically to see if it correlates with other information about the relevant area. For example, to see if there is a relationship between data on staff experience and patient experience. Recent research indicates a strong link between improved staff and patient engagement. There may also be a link with other HR data such as absence levels and staff turnover.

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Top tips:
— The NHS Staff Survey has directorate data as well as benchmark data - make best use of both.
— Use benchmark data for overall assessment against peer organisations.
— Use directorate data for shaping your organisational responses to any concerns.
Making data accessible

In order for local-level managers to make most effective use of NHS Staff Survey data, it needs to be made as accessible as possible. If possible, HR should provide an analysis of trends for leaders so that they can address any issues. Where outliers or sudden dips in scores are identified, these should be discussed with local managers to implement targeted interventions for which they are accountable. A number of organisations have incorporated NHS Staff Survey-related metrics into their managerial accountability mechanisms.

The NHS Staff Survey results have moved to a more infographic-based format, to help with presentation and improve engagement and impact. If possible, data results should also be broken down by demographic to support more tailored engagement strategies.

Top tips:
— Make data accessible for local level managers to use in local plans.
— Use infographics to make the data more understandable.

Raising the profile with staff

It is also essential to communicate the results and how the organisation is responding to them, using a range of communications channels to make sure that you reach all your staff. The most common method has been the ‘you said, we did’ approach, which presents the survey results to staff alongside what the organisation has done or intends to do about them. Although this can be effective, it can appear reactive if only presented as a ‘one-off’ communication when the results are published. Some trusts now present NHS Staff Survey data as part of an ongoing communication about the actions that the organisation is taking to address workforce issues. Trusts have also used a wider range of communication formats, such as podcasts and video, rather than just written formats.

Top tips:
— Use a range of formats and communication tools to share messages about the survey.
— Be active in showing you are responding to issues raised in the survey.
Beyond the NHS Staff Survey

In addition to the national and local surveys, a growing number of trusts now use online tools to allow for continuous dialogue with staff. These include crowdsourcing tools, which enable staff to submit ideas which are then analysed in more detail to identify ideas that can be taken forward.

Where the NHS Staff Survey identifies particular issues, other techniques may be used to develop solutions. For example, small working groups can use organisational development (OD) techniques to develop ideas for solutions. The NHS Staff Survey is not an end in itself, but rather provides essential data on what issues organisations need to address.

Year-on-year change in most areas is likely to be incremental, so set realistic aims. Rather than having a plan to address NHS Staff Survey results, an organisation should have an overall plan to improve staff engagement which is then updated in light of survey results. The analysis of the results and development of strategy will be led by HR and OD colleagues, but implementation of action plans is the responsibility of all managers and the board should hold itself accountable for progress.

Top tips:

- Consider the use of crowdsourcing technology to continue dialogue with staff.
- Small working groups can help to develop solutions to organisational challenges.

For more information on NHS staff engagement, please contact Steven Weeks at steven.weeks@nhsemployers.org.
NHS Employers

The NHS Employers organisation is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first. Our vision is to be the authoritative voice of workforce leaders, experts in HR, negotiating fairly to get the best deal for patients.

We help employers make sense of current and emerging healthcare issues to ensure that their voice is front and centre of health policy and practice. We keep them up to date with the latest workforce thinking and expert opinion, providing practical advice and information, and generating opportunities to network and share knowledge and best practice.

We work with employers in the NHS to reflect their views and act on their behalf in four priority areas:

- pay and negotiations
- recruitment and planning the workforce
- healthy and productive workplaces
- employment policy and practice.

The NHS Employers organisation is part of the NHS Confederation.

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