

*A Working Paper by the Standing Panel on
Executive Organization and Management*

**NATIONAL ACADEMY OF
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

January 2018

*Strengthening Organizational
Health and Performance in
Government*

Accompanying Working Paper #2

Understanding the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey

Prepared by Doris Hausser*



**Academy Fellow*

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

UNDERSTANDING THE FEDERAL EMPLOYEE VIEWPOINT SURVEY

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) administers the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), an annual survey of Federal employees that is a key initiative of the Office of Performance and Personnel Management within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The survey produces extensive results that can be examined across time and across organizations and employee groups to assess important aspects of strategic human capital management and can form a basis for developing, implementing and evaluating specific improvement efforts.

The FEVS is derived in part from surveys OPM initiated in the late 1970s called the Federal Employee Attitude Surveys (FEAS), which were designed to support evaluation research on the impact of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 and were also refined for use in evaluating personnel demonstration projects. The FEVS is more properly considered to be an example of a “climate survey” – rather than an attitude or opinion survey – because it measures employee perceptions of the presence and extent of conditions that support effective organizational health and functioning and performance improvements. Employees provide their views of workplace management practices, policies and procedures and organizational culture.

The extensive reports and analytic tools OPM delivers can provide actionable insights into where human capital management can be improved. The reports and tools are designed and produced using well-established survey methods that meet the highest professional standards. The sampling design and administrative protocols produce results with a 1 percentage point margin of error. Agencies can coordinate with OPM to collect and report survey data from organizations within their component units deep in the agency. This permits a much more in-depth view of organizational health across units in large agencies with varied missions and workforces. Agencies can also customize the survey by adding up to eight additional questions of their own choosing. The FEVS is a robust instrument that can be a valuable asset in managing and developing effective organizations.

Agencies can use their FEVS results for a variety of purposes. Agency leaders, including Chief Operating Officers, Senior Leaders, Performance Improvement Officers, Chief Human Capital Officers, program managers and others, can examine FEVS results to identify performance drivers in need of improvement and to highlight evidence of successful change initiatives and sustained progress. The FEVS data can offer direction and substantiate results, but it must be remembered that they provide a viewpoint and should always be considered in conjunction with related and corroborating information and analytics.

Agency experience using FEVS results varies. Some very large agencies, such as the Departments of Health and Human Services and Homeland Security, have worked with the survey data extensively throughout their organizations. Other agencies take a simpler approach and mainly look at overall agency results, focusing on trends and comparisons with government-wide results. A community of practice is building among users that provides opportunities to share best practices and innovations.

The Instrument, Data Collection and Reporting

Genesis of the FEVS: Legal Requirements. OPM’s government-wide surveys were originally developed to support research programs. However, at the turn of the 21st century, Congress enacted two statutory requirements that altered the research focus and led to the FEVS as we now know it.

First, the Chief Human Capital Officers Act of 2002¹ amended the functions of the OPM Director at Sec. 1103 of title 5, U.S. Code, to require that OPM “design a set of systems, *including appropriate metrics*, for assessing the management of human capital by Federal agencies” (emphasis added). Such metrics for measuring the strategic management of human capital include employee survey data and analysis.

The second legislative development came in a new provision included among “Other Federal Government Civilian Personnel Matters” in the 2004 National Defense Authorization Act,² Section 1128, Employee surveys, established a permanent statutory requirement for an Annual Employee Survey (AES) where each agency would survey its employees each year and make results available to the public by posting them on its website.³ Further, the Sec. 1128 language requires OPM to issue regulations “prescribing survey questions that should appear on all agency surveys...in order to allow a comparison across agencies.” The legal requirement for conducting a survey applies to each agency, but OPM conducts a centralized survey government-wide that agencies may use to alleviate the administrative burden.

What Gets Measured. Perhaps more important than the requirements to conduct surveys were elements the legislation directed OPM to measure. The Chief Human Capital Officers Act lists several aspects of strategic human capital management the required metrics should cover, including:

- closing skill gaps,
- ensuring continuity of effective leadership,
- sustaining a culture that cultivates and develops a high performing workforce, and
- holding managers accountable for managing human resources in accordance with merit system principles.

The Annual Employee Survey legislation requires the survey to assess—

- leadership and management practices that contribute to agency performance; and
- employee satisfaction with—
 - leadership policies and practices;
 - work environment;

¹ Sec. 1304, Strategic human capital management, of Subtitle A, Chief Human Capital Officers, of Title XIII, Federal Workforce Improvement, of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (Pub. L. 107-296–Nov. 25, 2002)

² Sec. 1128. Employee surveys. of Subtitle C, Other Federal Government Civilian Personnel Matters, of Title XI, Civilian Personnel Matters, of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004 (Pub. L. 108-136– Nov. 24, 2003)

³ An agency may forego posting survey results if the agency head makes a determination that doing so would jeopardize or negatively impact national security.

- rewards and recognition for professional accomplishment and personal contributions to achieving organizational mission;
- opportunity for professional development and growth; and
- opportunity to contribute to achieving organizational mission.

A specific set of survey items, issued in regulation at Subpart C–Employee Surveys, of 5 CFR Part 250–Personnel Management in Agencies, comprise the Annual Employee Survey (AES). In 2016, OPM reduced the AES from 45 items to 16, after (a) a critical review conducted by a cross-governmental agency task force using data analysis, stakeholder engagement, solicitation of expert opinion, and OMB input; (b) a thorough methodological and literature review and recommendations by university researchers; and (c) consideration of comments and suggestions provided in response to proposed regulation. The 16-question AES will always be included in the FEVS, and other questions are still covered to meet the Chief Human Capital Officer Act requirement for human capital management metrics.

The measurement requirements set forth in legislation were not restrictive. OPM and the agencies have the latitude to devise measures of additional conditions and practices. Over the years, OPM has developed indices to assess areas of particular interest using FEVS results. Currently, FEVS reports include four sets of such indices. Within any one set, no FEVS item is used more than once, but data from the same item may appear in more than one set. Table 1 shows these indices and their sub-indices, which are discussed further below.

TABLE 1 — FEVS INDICES		# of FEVS Items	2017 % Positive
Employee Engagement Index			
<i>Overall Employee Engagement</i>		15	67%
	Leaders Lead	5	55%
	Supervisors	5	74%
	Intrinsic Work Experience	5	71%
New IQ Index			
<i>Overall New Inclusion Quotient (The New IQ)</i>		20	60%
Five Habits of Inclusion	Fair	5	47%
	Open	4	59%
	Cooperative	2	57%
	Supportive	5	77%
	Empowered	4	59%
Global Satisfaction Index			
<i>Overall Global Satisfaction</i>		4	64%
Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework Index			
	Leadership & Knowledge Management	12	62%
	Results-Oriented Performance Culture	13	54%
	Talent Management	7	59%
	Job Satisfaction	7	66%

In recent years, employee engagement has received a great deal of emphasis as a construct that is closely tied to an organization's performance capacity. OPM developed an *Employee Engagement Index* based on 15 FEVS items, with three sub-indices: Leaders Lead, Supervisors, and Intrinsic Work Experience. These measures assess drivers of employee engagement and can provide insights about differences across organizational components or demographic groups and can offer direction for where and how to influence those drivers. More detailed information about OPM's research and development that produced the Employee Engagement Index is available in a report *The Keys to Unlocking Employee Engagement* on the OPM website at:

https://www.fedview.opm.gov/2016FILES/Keys_Unlocking_Engagement.pdf

A related index, the *New Inclusion Quotient (The New IQ)* was added in 2014 to help agencies gauge their standing in the areas of diversity and inclusion. The New IQ is described as follows in OPM's FEVS Reports:

The New IQ identifies behaviors that help create an inclusive environment and is built on the concept that repetition of inclusive behaviors will create positive habits among team members and managers. Behaviors included in the New IQ can be learned, practiced, and developed. Consequently, all members of an organization can improve their inclusive intelligence. Workplace inclusion is a contributing factor to both employee engagement and organizational performance. The New IQ is made up of 20 questions that relate to inclusive workplace environments. The 20 questions are grouped into "Five Habits of Inclusion" – Fair, Open, Cooperative, Supportive, and Empowering.⁴

A *Global Satisfaction Index* measures employee satisfaction about four aspects related to their work: their job, their pay, their organization, and whether they would recommend their organization as a good place to work. Understanding employee satisfaction along these four dimensions can help reduce costs in the long run. Satisfied employees are more likely to stay in their jobs, reducing turnover.

The FEVS continues to assess agencies' strategic management of human capital, as required by the Chief Human Capital Officers Act. The *Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework (HCAAF)*⁵ Index has used four components as consistent metrics for measuring progress toward HCAAF objectives. Using the same measurement indices across time provides an objective examination of progress in government. A total of 39 items make up the four subindices, which are: Leadership & Knowledge Management, Results-Oriented Performance Culture, Talent Management, and Job Satisfaction.

⁴ https://www.fedview.opm.gov/2016FILES/2016_FEVS_Gwide_Final_Report.pdf

⁵ In 2016, regulations implementing the CHCO Act were updated, and the Framework is now called the Human Capital Framework.

In addition, the survey includes a section on *Work/Life Program Participation and Satisfaction* to assess agency programs that address Work/Life balance. This section provides a systematic assessment of employee participation in and satisfaction with such programs to guide agencies and policy makers without requiring a separate survey.

As a consequence of the statutory requirements, further developments in the field of strategic human capital management, and increased focus on areas of particular interest, the FEVS has evolved while still providing continuity and supporting analyses across time and across agencies and organizational units. With the 2016 regulatory changes that reduced the number of standard AES items, OPM, OMB and the agencies will have more opportunities to adjust the survey items to address emerging issues, such as cybersecurity and burnout, and gather more feedback to guide strategic human capital management policy initiatives.

The Survey Instrument. Technical aspects of FEVS structure and administration are summarized briefly below. A much more thorough description of these particulars can be found in the *2016 FEVS Technical Report* at:

[https://www.fedview.opm.gov/2016FILES/2016 FEVS Technical Report.pdf](https://www.fedview.opm.gov/2016FILES/2016_FEVS_Technical_Report.pdf)

Survey Structure. The 2017 Viewpoint survey used 98 items in eight sections, as shown in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2 — FEVS SECTIONS	# of Items
My Work Experiences	19
My Work Unit	9
My Agency	13
My Supervisor	11
Leadership	10
My Satisfaction	9
Work/Life	13
Demographics	14

Most of the items had six response categories: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, and No Basis to Judge/Do Not Know. In some instances, these responses are collapsed into one positive category (Strongly Agree and Agree), one negative category (Strongly Disagree and Disagree), and a neutral category (Neither Agree nor Disagree). Many results are presented and discussed in terms of the positive category (“percent positive”), although the percentage distribution across all response choices is also available for each item.

Survey Sample. The FEVS survey population covers permanently employed, non-political, non-seasonal, full- and part-time Federal employees who were employed and in pay status as of a certain date. The sample size is designed to ensure a 95% chance that the true population value would be between plus or minus 1 percent of any estimated percentage for the entire Federal workforce. Only Federal employees are asked to fill out the FEVS. Including contractor and other non-Federal employees would require putting the survey through the clearance procedures

required by the Paperwork Reduction Act, and could conceivably involve amending a contract to require the contractor to conduct the survey or agree to have their employees surveyed. More important, much of the survey – as it is currently constructed – would not be appropriate for non-Federal populations. Those employees are not included in the Statistical Data Mart of the Enterprise Human Resources Integration (EHRI-SDM), which is the source of the list of employees eligible to be surveyed. Further, the statutory requirement for the Annual Employee Survey addresses only Federal employees.

OPM applies a Graduated Proportional Sampling (GPS) plan to develop a probability sample. Smaller proportions of the largest work units are selected for the survey. Small work units sample larger proportions. Using GPS allows OPM to use samples of 750,000–1,000,000, thereby reducing the time and financial burden, while maintaining the breadth that was achieved in 2012 when the FEVS used a census of more than 1 million employees rather than a sample.

Some employee categories of particular interest (e.g., SES or equivalent) are sampled in a separate stratum to ensure they are adequately represented in the agency sample. Small agencies and SES or equivalent employees are always a 100 percent sample.

OPM works with participating agencies for supplemental organization code information. This information indicates the hierarchical organizational unit(s) to which an employee is assigned and provides more detailed information than is available from the EHRI-SDM. These supplemental codes permit the generation of detailed sub-agency reports.

The FEVS uses the term “unit” with respect to both the sample stratification as described above and within the survey items themselves. Multiple FEVS items ask respondents to describe conditions and practices in their “work unit,” which is given this definition: *This is your immediate work unit headed by your immediate supervisor.* That term, “supervisor,” in turn uses this definition: *First-line supervisors typically responsible for employees’ performance appraisals and leave approval.* The sample can be designed to reach deep in an organization – to the point where fewer than ten respondents would constitute a work unit and no report would be generated. In some very large agencies, even as many as nine levels would not necessarily reach the lowest level of front-line employees who work for a first-level supervisor. In other agencies, those organizational codes could indeed reach the lowest level front-line employees, to the extent that numbers of sampled respondents meet the thresholds required to generate reports, FEVS subagency reports of the results for specific work units could be available.

Survey Administration. OPM partners with Westat, a professional services firm with an excellent reputation and extensive experience conducting large-scale surveys, to facilitate the success of the FEVS program. This involves conducting the survey, maintaining an extensive help desk call center, collecting and cleaning the data, weighting the data, and preparing analyses and reports that OPM distributes to the agencies using a dedicated website and on which OPM bases its summary reports.

The FEVS is a self-administered, web-based survey. Surveys are distributed for 6-week data collection periods in two waves to spread the workload. Westat operates a Help Center during the data collection period to answer employee questions. The survey takes about a half hour to

complete and can be answered during official work hours. An extensive system is used to track the status and disposition of each case sampled, including multiple attempts to locate respondents and sending reminders. Agency points of contact have access to ongoing response rate information for their internal components, which permits follow-up by agency management to encourage general participation in the survey.

Response Rates. To permit accurate calculation of final response rates, final disposition codes are assigned using rigorous rules that apply the guidelines developed by the American Association of Public Opinion Research for Internet surveys of specifically-named persons. FEVS response rates vary considerably by agency, but by and large fall well within an acceptable range. Government-wide the response rate has stayed in the 46–50% range. Some agency efforts to increase response rates have proven quite successful.

Data Cleaning and Weighting. Using a web-based survey permits ongoing data inspection and editing. After data collection, some editing and recoding is done (e.g., if a respondent reported no participation in a particular work/life program, the response to the item reporting satisfaction with that program was set to missing). To achieve the survey objective of making unbiased inferences regarding the perceptions of the full population of Federal employees, respondents' data are weighted using an elaborate three-stage industry-standard procedure. An analysis weight is developed and assigned to each respondent. This procedure is designed to adjust for varying probabilities of selection across subgroups and for nonresponses within agency subgroups.

Generating and Distributing Reports. Agencies can access their FEVS results in a variety of formats. OPM delivers sets of reports, beginning with Response Rate Reports and the Government-wide Management Report. In 2016, agencies received Agency Management Reports that included:

- A guide to understanding and using the results from the FEVS;
- A “Respondent Overview” section providing survey administration information (data collection period, sample size, agency and sub-agency response rates, agency results margin, margin of error), and highlights of the FEVS agency respondent characteristics;
- Sections that display scores, rankings, and trends for the Employee Engagement Index and The New IQ Index
- A section ranking the key drivers of the Employee Engagement Index for the agency;
- A series of Decision Aid tables that present all items that increased, decreased, or did not change since prior years as well as items considered a strength, challenge or caution item, when items became a past strength, and a feature highlighting an item if it was in the top ten positive or negative items; and
- Two appendices that show results for all items, benchmarked against the government-wide percent positive, and an appendix that presents the agency's work/life programs and demographic results.

Agencies also get sub-agency reports that show the percent positive, neutral, and negative results for each item across the sub-agencies, as well as Comparison and Breakout Reports.

Trend Reports show results for each item across multiple FEVS administrations, highlighting significant increases, decreases, or instances with no change in positive percentages from the previous year. The results available for analysis also include multiple demographic reports.

Data Analysis Tools. OPM supports generalized approaches to helping an organization – at the agency level or the sub-agency level – understand and act on its survey results. These approaches rely heavily on organizing the data, ensuring clarity of presentation, and using the process of exploring agency- or sub-agency-level data to stimulate diagnostic inquiry and discussion. Those discussions can lead to specific actions to address problems or at least to understand them better.

OPM has developed online tools agencies can use to examine FEVS results in greater detail. The FEVS Online Data Analysis Tool is a password-protected query and analysis system. The Tool allows an agency to access its own and government-wide FEVS reports; create custom reports; conduct analyses on FEVS data; print and/or export results in various file formats, including Excel; and save queries to use again later.

A second tool, referred to as “UnlockTalent,” facilitates in-depth analysis and uses dashboard presentation styles to make the survey data more accessible and actionable. Unlock Talent is designed to give agency officials more control over their data. It relies on inter-agency cooperation to build an important community of practice across agencies that shares best practices and innovations. This tool also allows the user to access relevant information from *FedScope.gov*, OPM’s online tool that allows customers to access and analyze the most popular data elements from OPM’s Enterprise Human Resources Integration-Statistical Data Mart (EHRI-SDM). Access to detailed data is provided while protecting employee privacy and EHRI-SDM security. Numerous workforce characteristics (“Who”, “What”, and “Where” of Federal Civilian Employment) are available for analysis. FedScope and FEVS data are not directly linked.

The *UnlockTalent.gov* web-site includes pages about Employee Engagement, Global Satisfaction, Community of Practice, and Agency Indicators (of high performing organizations). Agency-specific case studies, best practices, and other helpful resources are available on the Community of Practice page.

Using the FEVS Results

OPM’s online data sets and the tools to query them in depth provide a wealth of information that can give direction to forming hypotheses about organizational health and performance capacity issues that may be present. Developing action plans to address such issues can involve using the survey results – especially the Employee Engagement Index – as a starting point and examining FEVS data in concert with other available information for insights into relevant factors. Then subsequent survey results can be examined for evidence of improvement. OPM suggests some basic steps to take:

- Share results with employees.
- Review progress and determine areas of focus.
- Involve employee feedback in the action planning process.

- Engage leadership at all levels and across all components.
- Exhibit transparency by communicating actions to employees and keeping them informed of progress.
- Celebrate success.

Tracking trends over time is important for sustaining positive changes. Owing to the large response counts often present in FEVS results, “statistically significant” changes are extremely common. Monitoring survey items that have led to action plans and implementation can help keep attention focused over time.

Next Steps

OPM will continue to work with OMB and agency stakeholders to improve the FEVS instrument and data collection and reporting protocols, as well as the supporting tools that help agencies make productive use of the data. Integrating the FEVS program and results with other performance review and management improvement efforts should increase. Such integration will require top management support, as well as resources and coordination among agency staffs. Subject to the constraints imposed by the Annual Employee Survey questions being dictated by regulations and the requirements for human capital metrics, the survey questions and indices can continue to evolve, especially to ensure they produce actionable information. That being said, the richness of the data already in hand is undeniable.

Observations and Recommendations

- ***Conduct the full-scale FEVS survey administration bi-annually.*** Administering the FEVS to a large-scale sample every year is very taxing on resources and limits valuable development and follow through in the agencies. Nearly simultaneously with agencies and their internal staffs getting their data and starting to work through them, the activities required to plan and execute the next FEVS administration must get started. Curtailing the thoughtful analysis of a given year’s results represents some significant opportunity costs, especially with respect to demonstrating that survey results will actually be used and create positive change. The statutory requirement to administer the Annual Employee Survey could be met in “off years” using the 16-item AES now in regulation with a much smaller sample. That would still permit important indices to be assessed reliably each year (including those on which the Partnership for Public Service relies for its “Best Places To Work” exercise). OPM staff could capitalize on using the “off year” to develop analytic tools and training further. And the agencies would have more time to thoroughly process their detailed results and evaluate change initiatives that had been inspired by prior year FEVS results and discussion.
- ***Get and maintain support from senior leadership.*** To be most effective, using survey results to undergird change and evaluation efforts takes management commitment, resources and training. Senior leadership interest and support is essential. Expecting a supervisor to hold a work unit meeting, distribute detailed FEVS reports for the unit,

discuss the results, and plan follow up action without some training and/or onsite facilitation is unlikely to be effective, especially if employees have indicated the supervisor has shortcomings. As a consequence, employee interest may wane quickly and even put future response rates at risk.

- ***Applying related reviews helps focus attention.*** When a large volume of data and survey results are available for study and possible action, the opportunities can be overwhelming. It is easy to get “lost” among the plethora of reports and formats, both programmed and ad hoc, that can be generated using online tools. Agencies can use their related performance and management reviews to identify areas and issues where FEVS data may shed light on or corroborate findings and lead to suggestions for developing improvement actions in the human capital arena.
- ***Interpreting “significant” changes.*** Especially for large agencies, the presence of numerous “statistically significant” changes can almost be distracting. Applying statistical tests to the large response counts available in the FEVS samples will often (if not usually) result in a single percentage point change registering as “significant.” That is not to say the statistical significance is in error or that a positive change should be ignored. Rather, some practitioners recommend focusing on trend analysis and looking for 5, 7 or even 10 percentage point changes over time (e.g., 3–5 years) as indicators of sustained improvements.
- ***Presenting underlying concepts and frameworks helps when processing survey results.*** Using employee survey data to support organizational development is a well-established, decades-old practice. Research has established its efficacy for improving organizational health and performance. Some of the seminal work in this arena used surveys that operationalized particular models of organizational functioning and the relationships among components of the models. This had the beneficial effect of serving as a template for presenting survey results, discussing their implications, and formulating action plans and change initiatives. For the FEVS, the major index sets and the Human Capital Framework offer some structure for sharing and processing survey results.
- ***Act on negative findings only after corroboration.*** Long-term success with applying FEVS results depends on scrupulously protecting privacy and eschewing any temptation to rely solely on survey results to take action – especially punitive action. Creating real consequences for participating in the survey is essential, and including survey results in managers’ performance plans or among unit goals can generate sustained interest in the survey. However, negative findings that could lead to discipline or adverse actions should always be corroborated. Generally, OPM does not suggest that survey results should be used in anyone’s individual performance plan; there are too many intervening variables for any one person to be held accountable. Sadly, examples of vindictive employee behavior do occur occasionally. Further, developments and senior management action that might lead to the FEVS being perceived as the instrument of “witch hunts” within an agency could have a deleterious effect on employee participation.

Monitor employee perceptions of FEVS effectiveness. One key to maintaining good response rates is ensuring that the results are used productively. An important question was added in recent years and included in the revised AES: *I believe the results of this survey will be used to make my agency a better place to work.* The 2017 FEVS Government-wide Report puts this item among the “Top Negative Items” with a 31 percent negative result. This item should be carefully monitored. No agency should be telling its employees they want to hear what employees have to say and then leave them feeling they have dropped their perceptions down a well with no audible splash. “Used productively” need not require a massive effort, especially for agencies that are feeling their way through their data. Using FEVS results as a frame of reference when rolling out even a modest management improvement initiative can illustrate that agency leadership takes the survey and employees’ viewpoint seriously.