Commentary

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The Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey: A Practitioner’s View of Using the Data

The drive to improve the performance and accountability of federal agencies, combined with the Obama Administration’s commitment to data-driven personnel management, has elevated the importance of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) compared to its predecessors. From its roots in the Federal Employee Attitudes Survey 35 years ago, the FEVS has morphed from an instrument largely used to gauge the pulse of the federal workforce and evaluate the Civil Service Reform Act to one that is now used as a diagnostic and management accountability tool for agencies and their leaders.

The article by Sergio Fernandez et al. discusses the strengths of the FEVS and recommends refinements to help enhance the accuracy and value of FEVS data for the academic community. Given the increasing significance of the FEVS for improving the management and culture of federal agencies, practitioners, too, will need to understand the survey’s strengths and limitations, as well as actively contribute to the dialogue on the future of the FEVS that the article hopes to foster.

The FEVS is key to assessing agencies’ progress toward the administration’s goal of strengthening the engagement levels of federal employees. In a December 2014 memorandum to the heads of all federal agencies, the Directors of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and other senior officials underscored the linkage between employee engagement and organizational performance and noted that agency leaders would be held accountable for making employee engagement a priority, as well as an integral part of their agency’s performance-management system. The memo also included a performance target: by the issuance of the 2016 FEVS results, the federal government is to increase employee engagement—as measured by the FEVS Employee Engagement Index (EEI)—from 63 percent to 67 percent. Each member of the Senior Executive Service (SES) will have to improve employee engagement within their organization and create inclusive work environments, as part of their annual performance plans and appraisals.

OPM has made available several resources to help agencies analyze their FEVS data. They include UnlockTalent.gov. Managers can access this dashboard of engagement and satisfaction indices to review data for their own components and compare it to the rest of their agency and the government as a whole. Agencies also have access to the EVS Online Tool, which allows selected agency personnel to view item-by-item results, response rates, and other data at various component levels.

There are several compelling reasons to use the EEI—which is derived from respondents’ answers to FEVS questions on leadership, supervisors, and their intrinsic work experiences—to gauge the government’s progress in strengthening employee engagement. In addition to the general strengths of the FEVS noted by the authors such as its breadth of content and coverage of the federal workforce, indices are more stable from year to year than results from a single item. Indices are also easier for senior-level managers to interpret.

While the FEVS has certain strengths, because of the direct line of sight between the FEVS, employee engagement, and SES performance appraisals (and perhaps, too, SES performance bonuses), it is important for practitioners to understand its limitations and those of the engagement index. In addition to those already noted by the authors, managers should be mindful of the following:

- The engagement index is based only on positive responses: Although the FEVS has six response categories for most items (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, and No Basis to Judge/Do Not Know), the engagement index is based on a single, consolidated positive category (Strongly Agree
and Agree). This in turn might obscure analytically useful information. For example, two agencies could both have a 50 percent rating, but one might be 50 percent “Very Positive,” compared to another agency that is 50 percent “Somewhat Positive.” Moreover, if you want to see improvement in survey results, it is much harder to move people from the two negative ratings to the positive ratings than it would be to move people from the middle category to the positive rating. Similarly, the percent positive metric misses the fact that agencies or individuals could vary greatly in terms of the proportion of negative and neutral responses.

- **OPM excludes item nonresponse and no basis to judge answers from the denominator of its calculations:** Research has shown that item nonresponse and no basis to judge answers can be very informative. Overall, further research on variation in negatives, neutrals, and item nonresponse has the potential to inform scholars and practitioners concerned about federal employees’ views and experiences.

- **OPM tends not to produce measures of uncertainty with its reporting:** As a result, it is difficult for agencies to see if a year-to-year change is a function of sampling variation or something that is statistically significant. This could be especially problematic as data will be available for several component levels within an agency’s hierarchy and small changes in responses can result in larger changes in percentages.

- **The FEVS cycle time makes it difficult to identify promising practices:** OPM currently plans to stagger the administration of the FEVS from April to June and disseminate the results to agencies from August through September. Agencies, in turn, should disseminate EVS reports in September and October to managers, supervisors, and unions for purposes of data-driven reviews. Meanwhile, OPM suggests that component heads are to review progress on engagement efforts every six months, while other actions are to be taken on a quarterly and even on an ongoing basis. While this level of scrutiny underscores OPM’s commitment to improving engagement levels across government, the compressed cycle time combined with the fact that it can take several years for remediation strategies to take hold and have a measurable impact could cause some users to get caught up in short-term fluctuations while missing long-term trends. According to OPM, agencies that have successfully changed their culture report that three years of steady effort are needed before results could be achieved. Until more is known about what drives engagement and the length of time it takes for those drivers to manifest themselves, agencies will need to ensure that they do not overreact and change course with insufficient data.

Given these limitations, it will be important for agencies to augment their use of the FEVS with other sources of information. These other sources can include, for example, listening sessions, town hall meetings, suggestion programs, exit interviews, and opportunities for employees to provide anonymous feedback.

At the same time, the dialogue that the authors hope to foster between the practitioner and academic communities shows promise for improving how the data are used. The authors describe the partnership organized by the Government Accountability Office that includes federal agencies such as OPM and OMB, as well as various universities. Known as the Federal Data Users’ Group (DUG), its objectives extend beyond the FEVS and include (1) improving the quality and relevance of data and research on the federal civil service, with a particular focus on data quality and fitness for use; (2) data usage and stewardship including data sharing, developing more sophisticated analytical techniques such as modeling and forecasting, as well as privacy/confidentiality issues; and (3) ensuring that OPM and agencies are collecting the “right” information to cost-effectively manage the workforce and do rigorous workforce planning.1

The FEVS is an important tool for improving the management of the federal workforce. Although it has its origins in an instrument developed a generation ago, ongoing dialogue with stakeholders and openness for refinements can help sustain its fitness for use going forward.

**Author’s Note**
The author’s remarks are his own and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Government Accountability Office.

**Note**
1. The Federal Data Users’ Group meets quarterly and is led by Dr. Rebecca Shea, Assistant Director, Applied Research and Methods, U.S. GAO. Individuals interested in participating in DUG can contact Dr. Shea at shear@gao.gov.