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# What is an Employee Listening Strategy?

A photograph of three business professionals in a meeting. On the left, a man with short blonde hair and glasses is looking towards the center. In the middle, a woman with long dark hair is looking towards the right, holding a pen and a notepad. On the right, a man with short dark hair is looking towards the center, resting his chin on his hand. The background is a blurred office setting.

# What is an Employee Listening Strategy?

At People Insight, we've been talking for some time now with our clients about an Employee Listening Strategy, an exciting development that reflects current business need better than individual employee surveys.

*"An Employee Listening Strategy is an integrated approach to understanding the employee experience. It is purposefully designed to involve employees, harness their ideas and feedback, and respond in order to deliver the organisation's mission and objectives."*

*Dr Oliver Davidson, Head of Consultancy, People Insight*

There are a few terms in the sentence above that it is helpful to unpack.

- **'An integrated approach'** - Most organisations already deploy a range of employee listening techniques, but these tend to have been developed and implemented in isolation from one another. As a consequence, such approaches often clash, duplicate or leave gaps, rather than contributing to a streamlined, comprehensive overall perspective.
- **'Understanding the employee experience'** - This is about creating a clear, explicit understanding. Being able to draw out key insights, so they can be effectively shared, analysed and responded to.
- **Purposefully designed to deliver the organisation's mission and objectives** - This is perhaps the key phrase to expand on. It's the intentional development of an approach with a clear function rather than leaving this to simply evolve over time – to help the organisation achieve its strategic goals, whatever these may be.

A photograph of two women in a professional setting. The woman on the left is wearing a blue denim jacket and a black headscarf, looking down at a laptop. The woman on the right is wearing a dark top and a black headscarf, looking towards the first woman. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a library or office with bookshelves.

# Why do we need an Employee Listening Strategy?

**The terminology around 'employee listening' is becoming more widely used as organisations experience a number of trends.**

## 1. HR is becoming increasingly strategic

HR continues to strive to become a truly strategic business partner and this aim is furthered through the strategic design of systems (technology, reward, recruitment etc). Employee listening is a critical part of this and one that is highly visible, with employees, managers and leaders all being participants and 'customers' of the process.

## 2. We recognise the role of employees in change

It seems most organisations are going through some kind of change, responding to intense market competition and technological transformation. The notion of 'change as the new constant' has never been truer. However, change programmes often fail when employees haven't been involved. A listening strategy can provide the best kind of engaging involvement so employees buy-in and respond to change constructively rather than with resistance.

## 3. Your employees really want to be heard

There has also been a broader change in society at large that has shaped expectations. We live in something of a feedback culture, where people have the opportunity and expectation of expressing their views, whether through radio phone-ins, reality TV votes, online review sites or social media. That social and consumer experience spills over into the employee experience – people expect to be able to express their voice and to be heard. Coupled with a shift away from 'jobs for life' and towards portfolio careers, those employers that are not listening will lose out.

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#### 4. Employee feedback technology has rapidly become more sophisticated

As technology has proliferated, there is now a dizzying array of listening tools, which people are becoming more experienced in using. Continuous listening, pulse surveys and in-depth annual surveys are all finding their place alongside each other, for different purposes. Other tools such as ideation platform [Wazoku](#) or organisational network analysis like [Synapp](#) garner a different kind of feedback. Certainly, there is a prevalent view that the use of multiple employee feedback, listening and insight mechanisms can be better fitted to organisational needs.

#### 5. Feedback needs to be more integrated

Many organisations are now experiencing the pitfalls of a plethora of uncoordinated, ad hoc requests for feedback. Paralysis and frustration caused by survey fatigue, conflicting messages and a bias towards asking for input rather than acting on it. There's a pressing need to ensure that feedback is gained in an efficient, joined-up and relevant way – that's what a listening strategy offers.

The other technological change centres around data and technological integration. 'Big data' means disparate data sources are being brought together to support the creation of novel insights. This has created an expectation that employee experience data be understood in the context of operational, financial, customer and wider societal data.

**Sarah McPake,**  
Engagement manager  
at TSB cites 3 reasons  
to get into the habit of  
listening to your people

- **Firstly, to understand** what your people think of what you are trying to achieve (Are they bought in? Do they believe it? Is it achievable?).
- **Secondly to act and adapt.** Perhaps Goods In haven't understood the message, so you need a different comms tactic. Perhaps there's resistance in Finance requiring improved rationale or taking an unforeseen need into consideration.
- **Thirdly to involve.** By listening you show your people that you are interested in their opinion, that their individual view matters. But of course – this only works if you act on what you have listened to.

# So how do you design an Employee Listening Strategy?

**When designing an Employee Listening Strategy, the starting point is key. Developing a listening strategy starts with the Organisational Strategy - by design it's a top-down process.**

Key stakeholders should be involved in a discussion about how employee listening relates to the strategic aims of the business – these may be a mix of commercial, social etc., but the success of a listening strategy will be defined by how well it helps achieve these aims.



Of course, the business aims and strategy define an overall organisational People / HR strategy. In some organisations this is clear and explicit, in others it is more implicit in terms of HR investment priorities.

Taking these aims and priorities as the starting point it's possible to identify the listening techniques and tools that best support and align with the business and people strategies.

Once the strategic aims - and how employee listening can support these are clear, then the listening strategy itself can be developed. Of course, this is done in the context of current realities around existing commitments, resources, constraints and timescales.

We work with organisations to set out a vision of their ideal future state and help them plot a realistic pathway to progress towards that, typically over several years, while meeting current needs along the way.



## Consider a range of listening techniques

There are very many different techniques and approaches and different variations are emerging all the time. Many of these overlap in terms of the needs they meet.

A typical listening strategy will incorporate several different approaches, but it quite possible to have a very effective strategy without throwing everything in. The best recipes have several ingredients, but don't include everything from the kitchen cupboard.

**Components might typically include:**

### Surveys

- Candidates, new joiner and leaver surveys – for insight at key moments of the employee lifecycle
- Census surveys to track employee engagement in depth
- Regular pulse surveys for quick feedback on progress and hot topics
- 360 feedback for leaders and managers to hone their people management skills

### Listening groups

- In person or virtual focus groups to;
  - a.) Give qualitative feedback on important issues
  - b.) Crowdsource solutions to problems raised in surveys

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## Online platforms

- Online discussions & polls for quick responses
- Ideation platforms – taking ideas and suggestions into further detail
- Organisation network analysis – identifying connections and silos
- Scraping social media and review data – e.g. Glassdoor

## In person listening

- Stand up Q&As ran by leaders
- Team meetings and 1:1s for more local discussion and to generate feedback

However, as already discussed, the point of a listening strategy is that it is purposefully designed and strategically aligned. Some approaches may be specifically appropriate in particular organisations, but not others.

At TSB, there's a clear listening model incorporating the ways in which leaders glean actionable insight, enabling them to tweak their change programmes accordingly. There are a range of routine approaches for the whole organisation, alongside additional listening activities at key moments. Critically, each activity has a specific purpose and means TSB are listening to what people want to say, not just what TSB want to ask.

**[Have a look at TSB's Listening Strategy in our blog here.](#)**



## How frequently should you listen?

Few things in the 'employee insight world' have been debated more furiously over the last few years.

Some argue for very frequent or continuous 'always on' feedback mechanisms which allow up to the minute monitoring of employee sentiment, and if well embedded, facilitate quick responses.

However, others maintain that conducting such frequent polls or surveys you may find you are not gaining any new insights and don't have time to digest the data and take action. Continuous listening shouldn't become continuous ignoring.

In reality, of course, what's needed is an appropriately designed, mixed regime. A driver needs plenty of real-time information about the status of their progress on a journey and the state of the vehicle. But they also need less frequent, regular mechanical checks.

Different listening approaches provide different insights and work effectively at different rates.

*[Have a look at our resource covering survey frequency in depth here.](#)*



## What are the capabilities, resources and requirements you'll need in house?

**Any organisation can design and implement an Employee Listening Strategy. The only real requirement is a will to take a more strategic approach, rather than defaulting to approaches that emerge in an ad hoc way.**

Ideally, the organisation will have in place a clear Business Strategy and People Strategy, but in reality this often isn't the case, and it's not the end of the road. It just means initially identifying and spelling out the key strategic aims, priorities and challenges, so that the listening strategy can be built around these.

There is also a need to be able to understand what is possible in terms of employee listening, how different approaches can fit together to meet a range of strategic needs and to facilitate the development of an overarching approach from these. But this doesn't have to be provided in-house. This is the kind of perspective and objectivity that often relies on external expertise.



# What People Insight can do to help

**People Insight are experts at helping  
design and deliver Employee Listening Strategies.**

People Insight are trusted by many leading organisations to advise and support them to develop their listening strategies.

We help you give your employees a voice throughout the employee lifecycle, with a mix of approaches to suit your organisation. We advise on listening cadence to match your pace of change.

**Want to talk to us about your Employee Listening Strategy? Get in touch today!**

**We'd love to talk**

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