



## GUIDANCE NOTE: 5 Q&As FOR UNDERTAKING AN OFFICE PERCEPTION SURVEY

This Guidance Note is intended to help answer common questions that you may have prior to designing and implementing an “Office Perception Survey” in your workplace.

The [Health, Wellbeing and Productivity in Offices](#) report recommends that organizations conduct a perception study of their employees. The survey should measure employee attitudes about how the physical office environment affects them. We are asking organizations to undertake this survey to further investigate research that suggests that physical factors impact employee perceptions and that employee perceptions in turn influence business performance.

If you have further questions about how to implement an Office Perception Survey, please contact the WorldGBC at [betterplaces@worldgbc.org](mailto:betterplaces@worldgbc.org)

### WHY CONDUCT A SURVEY?

Simply measuring or assessing the physical environment itself and correlating this with organizational performance are not enough. It can be the case that physical environments perform well in terms of some functions (good thermal comfort, low air pollutants, etc.) but are nonetheless viewed less favorably by occupants who find them visually or structurally uninspiring or even depressing. Getting the physical conditions right is only part of the equation. Capturing the physiological and psychological effects of the physical environment – particularly with respect to wellbeing – is critical. In the same way that individuals can be healthy but not entirely well, offices can be performing functionally but not optimally. The perception study can show you important insights you would simply not

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Perceptions also provide a check on the objective measurements themselves. Not everyone responds to the same environment in the same way, so it is a good idea to understand how people perceive their surroundings. Simply identifying perceptions of the office can lead to all kinds of low-cost opportunities, from lowering temperatures to creating more “quiet or comfortable spaces” if some

individuals perceive the environment as too noisy or hot. Interestingly, having the physical environment operate within ranges considered “normal” does not necessarily mean that they will provide comfort levels to all occupants. So while it is always a good idea to seek out and follow guidance on physical features (air

quality, thermal ranges, etc.) it is also a good idea to check that they are having their intended effect.

How workers feel about the physical office environment is vital yet underutilized information by many employers. Despite a range of employee surveys – even those with health and wellbeing themes – seldom are there questions related to individual aspects of the physical environment (exceptions to this are highlighted below). Yet we know that the environment helps to create the experience, and so understanding more about the impact of the actual environment and space on people's perceptions of that space is essential.

## WHAT DOES A PERCEPTION SURVEY LOOK LIKE?

A perception study is at its most basic level a survey of employee attitudes. It involves asking the same set of specific questions to a large number of individuals, either in the same building or across a number of buildings. A survey can be done in person via paper-based surveys, or, as increasingly is the case, online. In the interest of achieving the highest possible response rates from building occupants it can even be beneficial to combine all three modes of delivery. Questions may be open-ended, in which employees are free to answer in words or sentences, or may offer a range of bounded choices, in which a selection of answers is provided for the employee to choose. Questions can also be progressive and branched.

Although bounded choices are easier to quantify and compare, open-ended questions are often critical for capturing important insights that would not otherwise appear when answers are provided to the employees. An open-ended comment box at the end of the survey or after specific questions is often the source of useful information.

A survey typically takes a snapshot approach by recording results at a particular period in time (sometimes for comparison at a later point in time to the same asset). But a survey can also be more open-ended and not time limited, so that employees can enter an opinion at any time (as, for example, occupants can report feedback in an on-going building log). The second approach, though less common, is more like a movie than a snapshot and allows companies to track and see progress in real time.

Typically, surveys that are shorter in length are the most successful. Surveys with health and wellbeing themes tend to have much higher response rates than other types of sustainability (e.g., energy efficiency), perhaps due to the immediacy and relevance of the subject to many people. Response rates for paper-based surveys may be better than for online surveys in some organizations, particularly if administered via the office manager/building manager, but issues of privacy and management bias need to be recognized. Overall, independent surveys, externally processed, ensure freedom from management bias and credibility.



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It can be beneficial to include a section within your perception survey that considers the employee levels of satisfaction in general, and overall attitudes towards work and management. Trends that arise within these sections can later be analysed against responses in other, more building-specific parts of the survey during the data analysis phase. Outputs for such a section may demonstrate a link between particularly low ratings for a specific building feature (air quality for example) and lower ratings for overall job satisfaction.

A typical perception survey that focuses on the physical environment has both general and specific questions, such as:

- Do you feel that the physical environment enables you to work productively? (general); and
- How would you rate the acoustics/noise in your office? (specific)

Both types of questions are essential, since the first one provides an overall assessment of how the space makes the occupant feel that is not dependent upon any one factor. Hence it provides a high level assessment of how the employee generally perceives the space provided. The second question and questions like it are more actionable because they allow employers/building owners to understand particular areas that might need improvement. Sequential or branching surveys can explore issues further. For example:

Question 1: How would you rate the acoustics/noise in your office? (Very good, good, etc.)

Question 1(a): If you answered negatively, what is the nature of the acoustics problem? (ventilation, voices, etc.)

Question 1(b): How would you like to see this improved? (less density, quiet areas, etc.)

Adopting the above approaches will allow you to assess the quality of data outputs from a survey. For example, by asking general and specific questions about the building and overall satisfaction it is possible to assess results for consistency throughout



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the survey. A positive or negative set of responses to specific questions asking for ratings of individual design features may be reflected in a positive set of responses to general questions about overall satisfaction. In turn this relationship would be corroborated by positive responses to the general questions relating to the building (such as ‘Do you feel that the physical environment enables you to work productively?’).

Lots of employees are asked lots of survey questions. So asking companies to conduct yet another survey

requires a good reason. We think we have uncovered it: few perception surveys of employees ask the kinds of questions that enable employers to correlate responses with objective measures of the office environment. Health and wellbeing questionnaires tend to be general and not particularly actionable when it comes to understanding how particular aspects of your building are impacting the people inside.

Asking specific questions about the physical environment across different types of buildings, or to the same building over time (where changes are introduced), can yield important development and management strategies. Since perceptions are related to the office environment and consequential for performance, organizations that perform these surveys can begin to understand how to use places to get the most from their people.

## HOW IS A SURVEY CONDUCTED?

Organizations themselves can conduct an online or in-person survey, or they can contract a third-party. In the latter situation, employees may be more willing to share honestly because responses are reported outside the company (and therefore anonymously), but likewise organizations may be concerned about confidentiality of the data when a third party is involved. Development of trust or confidentiality agreements may be required.

Typically, a survey of a limited number of questions is initiated and respondents have a set time to respond (for instance, one to two weeks). Companies may want to remind respondents about halfway through to complete the survey as this generally has a positive effect on response rate. Also, an incentive to complete the survey, like a prize draw or departmental competition of some sort, generally helps improve the response rate.

At the end, the results can be analyzed and compared within, or across buildings. Surveys are most useful when there is a physical “intervention” to be assessed, as in the case of a refurbishment or a new move, in which case both a previous- and post-occupancy assessment is advisable.

In a multi-tenanted building, it is important to capture information about both tenanted and landlord areas. A survey with questions about both areas can be useful for informing owner and occupier decisions

## WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO CONDUCT A SURVEY?

A survey can be conducted at any time to determine baseline data about present conditions. If there has been some kind of change, as in the case of a refurbishment or move, it is important to let some time pass before conducting a follow-on study to see how perceptions have changed. This is because new circumstances require some time for opinions (whether positive or negative) to settle in order to establish more reliable readings.

For example, a move or refurbishment sometimes causes an immediate but short-term “honeymoon effect”; conversely, sometimes new (or refurbished) buildings have some managerial/learning issues that need to be overcome. As a general rule in this instance, it is a good idea to wait at least several months before conducting a survey.

If follow-up surveys are conducted on a regular basis, it is also important to remember that results can be influenced by cyclical patterns of work or seasonal variations. So conducting investigations at the same time of year can be helpful as it mitigates other variables that could influence the results.

## WHO SHOULD CONDUCT THE SURVEY?

It depends, and in this respect some trends in measuring the physical environment are being replicated in the perceptual environment ([see the WorldGBC note on Air Quality](#)). Traditionally, surveys have been conducted by building experts using well-known and respected frameworks, such as those mentioned at the end of this note. These methods ask the general and specific types of questions mentioned above. They have a wealth of data against which to benchmark survey responses and are useful tools, with slightly different perspectives and research or commercial imperatives. But, as in any industry, that expertise comes at a price. This makes it occasionally difficult for organizations to conduct many repeat

surveys within a building or to roll out the questions to a large number of buildings and employees.

In the same way that indoor environmental monitors are enabling companies themselves to take on the work previously reserved for experts, so too have survey tools opened up possibilities for companies to take on the work of perception surveys themselves. Online survey tools such as Survey Monkey or Google Apps enable companies to write, distribute – even analyze – a much larger number of buildings than they could have hoped for using traditional survey methods. Because they can do so they can begin to cost-effectively build up data sets that enable benchmarking in a way that is more personal to the company and the space it provides its employees. However, these surveys may not be as scientific as standardized surveys designed and administered by experts.

For preliminary guidance, a sometimes useful perception survey is the one that is freely available, and increasingly important. Work in retail has shown that there is a wealth of perception data about place on social media ([see this WorldGBC note](#)) and there is every expectation that this type of online reporting of perceptions can be extended to offices. As with retail, this kind of data will become more ubiquitous and important in transactions, in everything from due diligence to rent reviews.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Here are 3 links to some globally-recognized perception surveys in English and other languages. They provide additional guidance and some sample questions for you to consider:

Center for the Built Environment (CBE) Survey  
[www.cbe.berkeley.edu/research/briefs-survey.htm](http://www.cbe.berkeley.edu/research/briefs-survey.htm)

Arup Bus Methodology  
[www.busmethodology.org/find-a-partner/arup](http://www.busmethodology.org/find-a-partner/arup)

Leesman Index  
[www.leesmanindex.com](http://www.leesmanindex.com)

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