



The Strategic Employee Survey

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An employee survey can be one of the most powerful tools for management in assessing the effectiveness of its strategy and maximizing the potential in its human capital. Strategic employee surveys can be used in four key ways: 1) identifying “warning signs” of trouble within the business in areas such as safety and ethics; 2) evaluating the effectiveness of specific programs such as benefits or initiatives including diversity; 3) measuring the satisfaction and engagement of employees to support recruitment and retention; and 4) driving high performance by analyzing employee perceptions of an organization’s climate for service. When properly designed, implemented and analyzed, employee surveys help management take action to align operations with its strategy, values and goals.

Employee surveys have been used in organizations for decades to help leaders understand how individual employees perceive their working conditions, job satisfaction, advancement opportunities and other qualitative aspects of the workplace. While employee surveys can be used for multiple purposes, leaders are increasingly using surveys as a strategic tool to maximize productivity and meet financial and other business objectives. The traditional employee survey measuring solely employee satisfaction or happiness is declining in popularity. A recent market research study by Gilliland (2002) finds that employee surveys are more commonly being used to ask employees to assess the work environment and the support provided to help achieve business goals.

Businesses are progressively beginning to use the results from surveys of employee teams and business units as predictive tools for customer satisfaction and business performance. Results are used to make appropriate adjustments in leadership practices, training initiatives and business processes.

Whether used defensively or offensively—that is, to forestall anticipated threats or to drive high performance—an effective

employee survey starts with strategy. The survey instrument should be designed with the appropriate business objectives in mind, whether this is enhancing employee retention efforts, evaluating the ethical mindset of the culture or improving business unit performance. Employee surveys can be carefully structured to capture data that will be of maximum effectiveness in helping management take action to align its operations with its values and goals.

Higgs and Ashworth (1996) note that over the past 70 years, the goals and methods of employee surveys have substantially evolved. Surveys in the 1930s and 1940s were often conducted to identify worker groups with low morale that were susceptible to union organizing campaigns. Over the next several decades, employee surveys were more commonly used to measure employee satisfaction more broadly, often as a tool to improve productivity. More recently, in the past 20 years, surveys have emphasized quality of life issues, benefits and other “employer of choice” topics, particularly as employers have become sensitive to the costs and challenges of recruitment and retention. Finally, the most current trend in surveys has been a focus on employee observations of business performance, in order to measure the effectiveness of key company strategies (Higgs and Ashworth, 1996).

Today, between half and three-quarters of large U.S. companies regularly conduct employee surveys or otherwise track employee attitudes (Kraut, 2004). Our own research in the U.S. shows that the frequency of employee surveys varies widely by industry and company size. Fewer than 30 percent of companies with 100 employees or less conduct employee surveys; by contrast, nearly three-quarters of companies with more than 10,000 employees do so. This may reflect the reality that, in general, larger companies have more complex operating structures and that management cannot “take the temperature” of a large, often distributed employee population through informal means.

In 30 years of conducting employee surveys for U.S. and multinational companies, we found that the common thread among businesses that value employee survey data is that they are strategy-driven. In general, large companies and those that are in knowledge-based industries, tend to rely on more sophisticated strategies, and in turn rely on employee data to measure the effectiveness of their strategy (often down to the unit level) and modify their business plans accordingly. But the utility of employee surveys is by no means limited according to company size or industry. For example, while retail businesses typically have a lower usage of employee surveys, we have conducted numerous surveys for retailers focused on unionization issues, store level effectiveness and other strategic measures.

Our research has shown that organizations generally conduct employee surveys for four, sometimes overlapping reasons to:

- Identify “warning signs” of trouble within the organization
- Evaluate the effectiveness of specific programs, policies and initiatives
- Gauge the organization’s status as an “employer of choice” among its workforce
- Predict and drive organizational outcomes, including customer satisfaction and financial performance

Figure 1: Strategic Survey Model



As shown in Figure 1, these objectives range along a continuum from defensive strategies (anticipating and defusing potential threats) to offensive strategies (driving high performance and using employee data as leading indicators of business results). Achieving the specific purpose obviously requires survey content that is tailored to the organizational objectives. For example, questions that predict an organization’s vulnerability to union organizing activity are likely to be very different from those that predict external customer satisfaction.

Employee Surveys as Warning Indicators

An employee survey can be an important source of “red flags” that highlight potential problems within the organization or its workforce. Such surveys can either arise as a result of specific management concerns (i.e., complaints, accidents or other evidence that suggests a problem) or as a result of management

taking initiative to prevent problems from occurring. Such warning signs cover a wide range of organizational issues, such as workplace safety, ethics and values, and union vulnerability.

Concerns about safety may range from physical harm to employees as a result of unsafe working conditions or practices, to workplace violence or substance abuse, to security of company and personal property. Often the survey is used to identify gaps between the company’s policies, procedures and objectives with regard to safety and the reality of those safety issues, as they are perceived by employees. Specifically, typical objectives of safety surveys involve:

- Using employees as observers of specific safety practices
- Measuring the level of importance employees place on safety
- Evaluating the need to make employees more conscious of safety
- Determining whether employees are willing to report safety violations
- Determining whether employees receive a satisfactory response when they report on behaviors of their co-workers or other safety issues

A safety-related survey may include employee perceptions of items such as the following:

- Management sets example for safety
- Safety valued over budget/schedule
- Response to safety issues
- Understand safety procedures
- Protected from health/safety hazards
- Sufficient medical facilities
- Company is the leader regarding safety

Safety survey results are used to evaluate an organization’s climate for safety and determine whether additional training for employees or management is needed. One of the most important functions of employee surveys in an area such as safety is often to disabuse management of the belief that because they have a policy on a particular issue, they have successfully addressed that issue throughout the organization. Surveys tend to reveal the reality of how and whether policies and procedures are actually implemented at the workforce level.

This is also true in an area that has attracted considerable attention in recent years, namely, the issue of corporate ethics. Few organizations, of course, are likely to suffer the devastating leadership-driven ethical lapses that undermined companies such as Enron and WorldCom. But maintaining an ethical work environment and values-driven culture is a challenge that most, or all organizations, face and that have substantial bottom-line ramifications. A series of studies by Kotter and Heskett (1992) found that organizations with cultures focused on balancing the interests of multiple stakeholders (customers, employees

and investors) and ensuring proper management skills at all leadership levels outperformed those with a disproportionate focus on short-term financial gains. Those with balanced focus increased revenues by an average of 682 percent, while those more narrowly focused on short-term financial gains increased revenues by only 166 percent over an eleven-year period. Other business results, including net income, stock prices and workforce levels, also increased at significantly higher margins in organizations with more balanced cultures.

Organizations often rely on employee survey data to determine whether the values structure and ethical standards established by senior management are in fact being disseminated and propagated throughout the culture. Companies going through major transitions such as acquisitions or management succession may need to assess the values that are dominant within the existing culture and, subsequently, evaluate their success in establishing a new standard. The results of surveys related to ethics and values can help company leadership develop a plan of action, including targeted education and training programs for managers and employees, improved corporate communications, compliance audits, advancement and recognition programs, changes in hiring standards and performance reviews, and other specific tools.

Another common “warning sign” identified through employee surveys is vulnerability to union organizing campaigns. As Higgs and Ashworth note, this use of surveys dates all the way back to “non-unionization” efforts in the 1930s. Most businesses in North America continue to resist unionizing programs for financial and strategic reasons. In their view, unions can serve as an impediment to workforce communications by inserting a third party between leadership and workers. This can reduce the effectiveness of an organization’s implementation and alignment of corporate strategy.

In many geographic regions, union drives are typically based on worker dissatisfaction over issues such as pay and benefits, respect, and physical working conditions. Employee surveys

are important tools in identifying locations, worker groups, specific management practices and “hot button” items that stoke a desire for third party representation. From these data, management can take corrective steps to defuse the underlying worker concerns that often give an opening to unions.

Employee Surveys as Program Evaluation

Employee surveys are also commonly used to evaluate the effectiveness of major corporate initiatives or influence the design of such initiatives through employee input. This includes workforce programs such as employee benefit packages, where organizations will often survey employees to evaluate the attractiveness of alternative benefit programs and elements, and then develop or modify the final package based on employee feedback. In such circumstances, organizations may devote the entire survey to a single topic.

Among the most common corporate programs in which organizations rely heavily on employee survey data are initiatives related to diversity. Economic trends such as a shortage of talent, global competition and the pursuit of new international markets have put a priority on the ability of organizations to do a better job recruiting and retaining women and members of minority groups. This is an area where proper gathering and segmentation of employee data can help organizations identify key workplace factors that influence retention among specific subsets of the employee population.

Table 1 shows the results of a survey conducted at a major U.S. banking organization. These results demonstrate that reliance on overall employee statistics from employee surveys is entirely misleading, and that important differences generally exist in the responses among employees of different racial and ethnic origins. For example, in 2004, while scores for the diversity theme overall show 63 percent favorable responses, a segmentation by race reveals that only 42 percent of African Americans responded favorably. This particular banking organization has conducted three employee surveys since 1996 addressing diversity issues. As a result of this analysis, leadership at the organization has

Table 1: Banking Case Study Diversity Results

Percent Favorable by Ethnic Origin

	Overall	Asian	African American	Hispanic	White
Diversity Theme Overall	63	61	42	62	69
Item: Easy to fit in	70	65	52	69	75
Item: Opinions valued regardless of age, gender, etc.	64	65	41	65	71
Item: Managers hire/retain diverse workforce	59	56	39	58	65
Item: Developed/advanced regardless of age, gender, etc.	58	56	35	56	63
% of respondents	100%	6%	14%	9%	65%

been able to target actions to improve these ratings and hold managers accountable for results. Between 2000 and 2004, the bank's initiatives to support diversity were highly visible and focused on training of employees and management, publicizing the status of goals, and placing diverse staff in high-level positions. In 2004, expectations were high, but the survey diversity scores were lower than expected. Leadership concluded from the results that not enough was being done to hire and promote minorities and more emphasis was necessary on achieving diversity at senior levels. Recently the bank has increased the number of high-level placements involving diverse staff.

Table 2: Historical Banking Case Study Diversity Results

Percent Favorable for Diversity Theme Over Time

Years	Overall	Asian	African American	Hispanic	White
1996	52	57	32	49	61
2000	66	59	47	60	73
2004	63	61	42	62	69

Employee Surveys as Measures of “Employer of Choice”

Many organizations are also using employee survey tools to measure the climate within their workforce. These tools measure the attractiveness of the organization as an “employer of choice” for recruiting and retaining key employees, and the “engagement” of the workforce in terms of the willingness of workers to provide discretionary independent effort to deliver better results.

The desire to be known as an “employer of choice” derives in large part from a concern with a looming shortage of talent driven by demographics and, as a result, intense competition to recruit and retain employees, particularly knowledge workers, in the global economy. Frank, Finnegan, and Taylor (2004) note that “a growing awareness of unavoidable demographics is creating a greater urgency for HR professionals everywhere to focus more attention and energy on retaining talented employees and keeping them actively engaged in their work.” They cite surveys from large accounting firms that show retention of key workers is the top priority among the HR community.

The focus on retention is not solely driven by a growing shortage of experienced workers to fill technical, professional and managerial jobs. Most organizations are also aware of the significant costs of turnover, in terms of training, lost productivity and lost opportunities, when competent workers take their knowledge and skills elsewhere. Estimates of turnover costs range anywhere from 25% to 200% of an employee's salary and benefits (Talent Keepers, 2005). A Study by Hillmer, Hillmer and McRoberts (2004) on turnover in call centers

found that the cost of turnover was roughly equal to the salary for each position vacated. Another review of turnover at a large healthcare institution found the overall cost of turnover to be 3.4 to 5.8 percent of the annual operating budget (Waldman, Kelly, Arora and Smith, 2004).

Despite the occasional downturns caused by recession, emphasis on talent retention and employer of choice cultures has shifted the balance of power in favor of the employee. As a result, employers are recognizing that employees increasingly have choices about where and for whom they work, and that the reputation and values of the organization play a substantial role in the growing war for talent. To the extent that recruits and employees alike perceive a compelling employment opportunity and work experience at a given company, they are more likely to join and more likely to stay. As a result, organizations are closely measuring their reputation as employers and actively marketing their workforce culture, particularly their mission, vision and values, in the recruitment process.

Employee surveys can be an important tool in measuring the effectiveness of the employer's brand as an “employer of choice.” Such tools can also identify pockets of dissatisfaction down to the business unit level, as well as key drivers among the company's policies, values and leadership practices that contribute to higher levels of turnover.

Two main forces impact an employee's decision to leave an organization; the “push” and the “pull.” The “pull” comes from external sources, including opportunities for new jobs, advancement, more pay, etc. The “push” comes from dissatisfaction in the current employer that makes the employee more inclined to seek alternatives and more susceptible to outside recruitment efforts. Interfering with the push and pull forces is the natural friction that tends to keep people from making changes: cost, fear, uncertainty, existing relationships, family situations, etc. There is little that employers can do about the “pull” from other sources, but employers can identify and, to some extent, control the “push” of dissatisfaction through proper implementation and analysis of employee survey tools.

A statistical analysis of survey results can help the employer understand the elements of the employment relationship that most influences the employee's decision to stay or go. For example, it is common to include an item in employee surveys such as: “I am seriously considering leaving my organization within the next 12 months.” Such an item can then be treated as a dependent variable in a multiple regression analysis. The other items in the survey can be treated as independent variables and regressed against the measure of turnover intention. The resultant regression equation will identify items in the survey that carry the most weight in decisions about staying or leaving the current employer.

The data from the WorkTrends™ survey allows us to benchmark the results of individual company surveys for a national workforce as a whole, specific industry sectors and best practice companies. By conducting the kind of regression analysis described above using the WorkTrends survey data, we can identify the overall key drivers of employee retention. While the importance of individual drivers will vary by age, job level and industry, we have found that these factors largely apply across the employee population.

The key drivers of retention for the U.S. workforce, according to the WorkTrends survey, are:

- Career development opportunity
- Sense of accomplishment
- Job security
- Confidence in future
- Pay

The WorkTrends data also show that these factors have remained relatively constant over the past decade. As Table 3 shows, the importance of career development opportunities has remained unchanged throughout this period as a factor in driving turnover. Interestingly, pay has actually declined as a factor influencing turnover, while “sense of accomplishment” has gone through a parallel rise in importance.

While we can generalize about key drivers by analyzing results of national surveys of the worker population, we can also derive information about an individual organization by analyzing their survey results (in some instances, comparing their results to normative or “best practices” data). Such information can help the organization apply different tactics to business units and job types or levels, depending on the specific importance of individual retention drivers. Not surprisingly, executive managers, scientific or technical employees and individual contributors may all assign different weights to the various retention factors. Individual employees may be most concerned with job security, for example, whereas technical employees may be focused on their sense of accomplishment, and managers or leaders may be most influenced by career development

Table 3: Historical Drivers of Retention

1995	2000	2005
Opportunity for a better job	Opportunity for a better job	Opportunity for career development
Amount of pay	Job security	Sense of accomplishment
Confidence in the future	Like the work I do	Job security
Sense of accomplishment	Amount of pay	Confidence in the future
Satisfaction with recognition	Satisfaction with recognition	Amount of pay

opportunities. Understanding these different drivers will help the organization tailor its HR policies accordingly to maximize the retention influences for specific jobs.

We have found that surveys aimed at measuring “employer of choice” attributes should include content measuring: fair compensation, recognition and feedback, job security and confidence in the future, job and company satisfaction, communication, teamwork and career development (Wiley, Brooks, & Hause, 2003 and Hause & Wiley, 1996). These topics are the most consistent predictors of employee retention and overall job satisfaction. To the extent that a specific survey reveals weakness in these items, either on an absolute basis or in comparison to “best practices” results, the organization can establish, prioritize and implement a set of actions intended to improve employee perceptions in these areas.

It is important to note that surveys measuring the organization’s reputation as an “employer of choice” are increasingly also focused on employee “engagement.” While this includes an individual’s job satisfaction, the concept of engagement is much broader. Frank et al. (2004) define engagement as the willingness of the workforce to provide discretionary effort—to be good citizens and go above and beyond the call of duty in delivering customer service. While Frank et al. believe that engagement is “joined at the hip with employee retention,” the focus on engagement also reflects a growing use of surveys to predict organizational outcomes (see subsequent discussion).

As outlined by Colquitt and Macey (2005), engaged employees are more adaptable to change, more proactive, more loyal, more positive and more aligned with the culture and values of the organization. As a result, organizations that foster engagement deliver better performance, in terms of both customer satisfaction and financial results, because their employees will be more committed to the goals of the organization.

Employee Surveys as Leading Indicators

A growing body of research has begun to use employee surveys as the linchpin in linking an organization’s leadership practices, its employee perspectives, its customer loyalty and its long-term financial performance. This represents the most proactive or “offensive” strategic use of the employee survey—as a tool to predict customer and business outcomes. The concept was first explored by Benjamin Schneider and his colleagues in 1980, and Wiley (1996) coined the term “linkage research” to describe the body of research in this area: “Linkage research involves integrating and correlating data collected from employees with data in other key organizational databases. The purpose of linkage research is to identify those elements of the work environment, as described by employees, that correlate, or link, to critically important organizational outcomes such as customer satisfaction and business performance.”

Wiley presented a comprehensive summary of the research literature that resulted in the development of the Linkage Research Model, later re-named the High Performance Model. Further research (Wiley & Brooks, 2000) produced a taxonomy of the high performance organizational climate. Other studies (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994 and Rucci, Kirn, & Quinn, 1998) have similarly demonstrated how employee surveys can be used as a tool to identify leading indicators of organizational results.

Figure 2: The High Performance Model



The High Performance Model, shown in Figure 2, describes how certain leadership practices (customer orientation, quality emphasis, employee training and involvement) create positive employee results. To the extent that employees perceive these practices emphasized in their organizations, they are more likely to report higher job satisfaction, more knowledge of and alignment with the company's vision and values, and improved teamwork and cooperation. They are also less likely to voluntarily resign. These employees are better positioned to deliver value to customers and thus drive improved customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Over time, greater customer loyalty generates improved business outcomes, including sales growth, market share and profitability.

Linkage research is a natural complement to other holistic models of organizational performance that emphasize leadership, such as the Service-Profit Chain (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994) and the Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). The Balanced Scorecard, for example, is a vehicle for translating management strategy into action, by connecting the leadership practices and values of a company with its core inter-related organizational processes. The scorecard, made up of leading and lagging indicators of performance, reflects the integrated systems that impact an organization's success or failure.

In a similar way, the High Performance Model pinpoints the leadership practices that drive employee results. An employee survey focused on High Performance Model themes can help an organization diagnose its strengths and weaknesses in the cycle of performance. Rather than emphasize employee-focused items related to job satisfaction, this approach positions the employee as an observer and reporter of the organization's leadership practices and climate for service. These leadership practices (customer orientation, quality emphasis, employee training and involvement) have shown the greatest predictive potency as leading indicators of customer satisfaction and business performance.

For example, traditional measures of employee satisfaction focus on the employee's personal experience and emphasize items such as the following:

- Job uses skills and abilities
- Job performance evaluated fairly
- Manager is good at "people management"
- Rate physical work environment
- Rate total benefits program

By contrast, our linkage research studies have demonstrated that the leadership practices outlined in the High Performance Model serve as much better predictors of business outcomes. These practices are measured using items such as the following:

- Use customer feedback to improve
- Policies and procedures are customer-friendly
- Clear standards for product/service quality
- Encouraged to participate in decisions
- Get training to keep up with customers

This approach to the employee survey casts the employee as an ally in assessing the organization's value proposition. Based on employee feedback, the organization can predict customer and financial performance down to the business unit level and develop an action plan that aligns unit performance with the company's strategy, including areas where leadership, training, staffing, technology and other tools need to be evaluated and improved.

Proper analysis of surveys developed according to the High Performance Model also enables organizations to target their resources and action plans to those areas that are most likely to drive performance. The more common Human Resources model is to focus the organization's efforts on those results that score "lowest" in the employee survey. However, we have found that organizations can achieve a greater return on investment by focusing on areas that are most predictive of business outcomes (such as customer orientation, quality emphasis, training and involvement), even if those areas rank higher than other items measured in the survey.

Case Study

A recent case study demonstrates the power of the “leading indicators” approach to employee surveys in shaping organizational action plans. We worked with the new CEO of a global organization that had recently been formed from six business units of a consumer health products company. The CEO concluded that the keys to success for the new company would be customer service, consumer focus (reflecting the organization’s wholesale and retail customers) and dynamic leadership. In order to develop an action plan to achieve these goals, the CEO and top Human Resources executive wanted a baseline assessment of the organization’s culture among its managerial and professional staff.

We worked with the company’s top HR professionals to implement a survey based on the themes of the High Performance Model, in a structure we call the “Inside Track” survey, utilizing many of the items described in Table 4. This survey was implemented with the top 2,000 people in the organization with a participation rate of 79 percent, and the results were analyzed in comparison to industry norms and best practices established through the WorkTrends survey data. The results of the survey are shown in Figure 3, which also displays the range of results among the six business units.

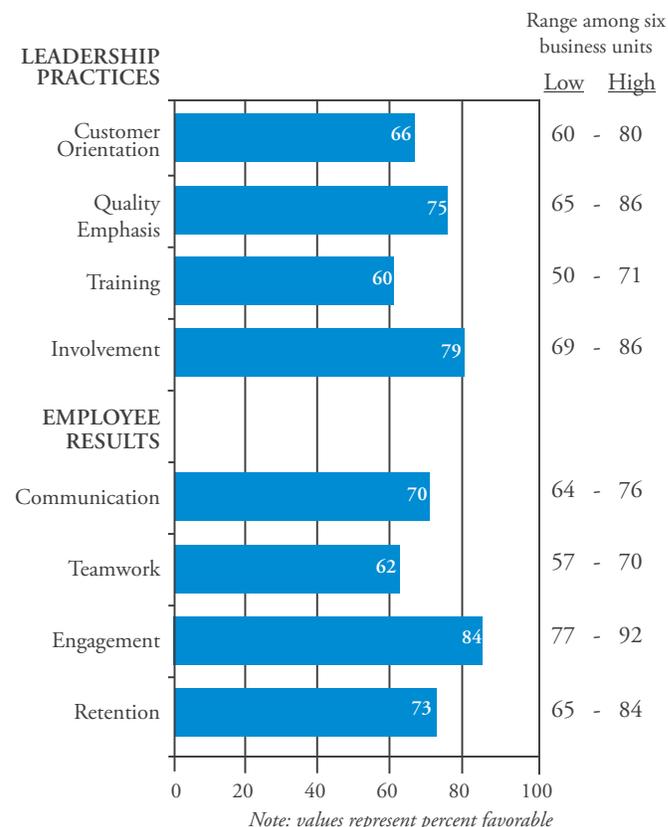
The CEO led an intense, offsite review of the survey findings as part of a multi-day leadership team-building retreat. During that session, the team identified several priorities for follow-up action, reflecting the High Performance Model themes where there was the greatest gap between business unit performance and WorkTrends best practices. At the unit level, the company has implemented follow-up actions and instituted a schedule of future assessments to monitor progress.

This approach reflects the highest and best use of the employee survey: the survey content was designed and driven by the organization’s top level goals; the analysis reflected those areas most predictive of future performance; and the action plan and follow-up were developed in order to align operations with the overall strategy.

Table 4: High Performance Model Sample Items

Theme	Item
Customer orientation	Customer problems are corrected quickly
Quality emphasis	Continually improving quality
Training	New employees get necessary training
Involvement	Authority needed to serve customers
Communication	Enough information about meeting group
Teamwork	Co-workers cooperate to get work done
Engagement	Proud to work for my company
Retention	Not seriously considering leaving

Figure 3: Global Consumer Health Company InsideTrack Results



Conclusion

The employee survey is an important tool for helping organizations manage their workforce and enhance their overall performance. Properly designed survey instruments can serve a number of purposes: identifying “warning signs” within the organization in areas such as ethics violations; aiding in the design and implementation of high-priority organizational programs such as employee benefits and diversity initiatives; evaluating the organization’s standing as an “employer of choice” to assist in recruitment and retention; and predicting organizational performance and measuring the effectiveness of key leadership practices.

What these purposes have in common is a focus on organizational strategy. The most effective employee surveys are developed based on a clear set of goals that are aligned with the direction established by the organization’s leadership. In this way, the survey content can measure information that will provide practical, powerful results and a roadmap for specific action plans. Fundamentally, we believe that an employee survey is only of value to the extent it is used by management as a guide to implement strategy, improve performance and achieve business objectives. ■

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About Kenexa

Kenexa provides business solutions for human resources. We help global organizations multiply business success by identifying the best individuals for every job and fostering optimal work environments for every organization. For more than 20 years, Kenexa has studied human behavior and team dynamics in the workplace, and has developed the software solutions, business processes and expert consulting that help organizations impact positive business outcomes through HR. Kenexa is the only company that offers a comprehensive suite of unified products and services that support the entire employee lifecycle from pre-hire to exit.

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