Anonymous or Attributed Surveys?
Evaluating the use of preloaded demographic data and making the best choice for your organization

Introduction
Companies that choose to survey their employees have many design options available to them. Paper and/or web administration, multiple languages, question format (e.g., multiple choice, open-ended, rank order) are just a few of the choices. But what about options for collecting demographic or hierarchy data? Both types of data are powerful and essential tools for analyzing survey data in a way that maximizes insight. There are two options for collecting demographic data as part of employee survey administration, and each has significant implications for the survey administration and analysis process. This paper explains the differences between anonymous surveys and attributed surveys and provides helpful guidance for choosing the right approach for your organization's survey.

Confidential surveys are not anonymous, or is it the other way around?
“Anonymous” and “confidential” are both used to describe surveys, and there is sometimes confusion associated with these terms. The dictionary defines anonymous as “having no name acknowledged” or the name is withheld. Confidential is defined as holding information in strict privacy or secrecy. Confidential implies that some information is known, or at least collected, but is not shared with others. If something is anonymous, is it also confidential? Yes; names of the individuals supplying the information are not collected or associated in any way with the information. Further, data collected anonymously may be held back and not shared with certain users. Can something that is not anonymous be confidential? Yes, it can, presuming the identifying information is well controlled to maintain privacy. Confidential information can be perceived as anonymous to some users if they have no way to access the private or secret information. In this case, the data is confidential to those who maintain the private data and anonymous to the users of the data.

What is an anonymous survey?
Anonymous surveys mean there is no way to identify how a specific individual responded to the survey, and this can only be achieved if all data for a respondent is provided by the respondent. In a web-based survey administration, all respondents enter the survey with identical credentials; the system cannot distinguish one user from another. For paper administration, all employees receive exactly the same questionnaire. Demographic data, from hierarchy information to gender, job type, length of service, or any other demographic is provided by the respondent. All that is known about respondents is what they choose to report; if they skip some or all of the demographic questions, there is no way to replace this information.
In the early days of organization surveys, all surveys were anonymous; there was no easy or foolproof way to precode demographic information by individual respondent. The advent of Human Resources Information Systems (HRIS) and databases has provided many companies with an alternative for collecting demographic and hierarchy information, and companies are taking advantage of this opportunity.

**What is an attributed survey?**

Attributed surveys can link employees’ survey responses to their demographic and hierarchy information from an HRIS database. To do this, each employee enters a web-based survey with unique credentials, either a unique username or password or through a Single Sign On system (SSO). The survey system recognizes the individual, verifies his or her eligibility to participate in the survey, and matches a string of demographic information about the respondent to his or her survey responses. In general, demographic or hierarchy questions are not part of the survey itself, and respondents do not need to respond to them (this paper covers more on that later). This process is more complex for paper survey administration, as a unique survey must match to a specific individual.

Demographic data for all respondents is as complete and accurate as it is in the HRIS system. Employees must be informed at the beginning of the survey that demographic information is being added to their survey responses behind the scenes, and some companies and countries require that employees agree to this data’s inclusion. Any company considering this approach must ensure all applicable data privacy guidelines are being followed.

**Which approach is confidential? Which approach is anonymous?**

Best practices would dictate that all surveys should be confidential. Even if specific survey responses can link back to a specific individual, this information should not be shared; employees need to know their responses will be handled with great care and that no employees will be called out for their responses. All surveys should have ample controls to guarantee confidentiality, such as minimum group sizes for reporting, restricted access to the survey database, and strictly limited access to unique identifiers from the database. Any and all confidential provisions that have been shared with employees must be strictly adhered to throughout the survey process.

Clearly, anonymous surveys are anonymous, meaning there is no way to link an individual with his or her survey results. And although some might say a unique combination of demographic information (e.g., a female engineer with 5–10 years of service working in corporate headquarters for manager John Smith) can identify an employee, the reality is that the demographic data available is rarely detailed enough or provided in such combinations in reports to provide foolproof identification of individuals. Standard reporting rules prevent any user from accessing individual-level data or seeing the demographic details of very small numbers of employees.

Can an attributed survey be anonymous? Yes, in a manner of speaking. Many companies have clear and restrictive rules for data access that prevent the company from having any access to the survey source data.
What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?

Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages that require careful assessment before finalizing a decision on the right approach for your organization.

Anonymous surveys have the advantage of transparency; organizations using this approach can assure employees that the only data collected is the data the employees choose to share. Respondents can choose to skip any or all demographic questions if they are not comfortable with the organization having that data.

Anonymous surveys are also relatively easy to administer; there is no requirement to provide unique codes or entry points for employees. That said, some limited pre-coding may be done, either with web surveys or paper surveys. For example, employees taking an anonymous web survey might be assigned a passcode that identifies the specific location or business unit where they work. Paper surveys can be precoded to provide similar information. Every employee at that site or division would share the same code, so no identification of individuals is possible.

Consider the following issues before implementing an anonymous survey:

- Anonymous surveys require the creation of sometimes elaborate and lengthy sets of questions that allow respondents to choose their placement in the hierarchy. Employees can inadvertently place themselves in the wrong part of the hierarchy structure if the naming convention is not clear or if they are not familiar with the organization structure outside their own work location.
- Employees may also respond to the demographic questions inaccurately. Job names and types may be so generic that they are unclear, or employees may not recognize their appropriate categorization. Employees may also purposely miscode both their hierarchy and demographic data as a way to hide or protect their identity.
- Since survey access is through a single set of credentials, there is no way to prevent unauthorized persons (e.g., contract employees or temps) from completing the survey, nor is there a way to prevent an authorized employee from completing the survey more than once.
- All of the above issues will yield missing or inaccurate data, which will negatively impact response rate reporting and report generation.

Either purposely or mistakenly, such errors can lead to nonsensical data, such as response rates over 100% for a particular group or a surplus of executives beyond what the company knows is accurate. These issues can cause executives and managers to question the integrity of the process and discount the resulting data.

The primary advantage of attributed surveys is the high quality of demographic and hierarchy data. The hierarchy and demographics linked to the survey data will be as complete and accurate as the source HRIS database, which greatly enhances the integrity of the survey data and reports as well as the credibility of the survey process. Any number of demographic fields may be appended to the survey responses, including information employees themselves may not know, such as whether they are considered high potential. Because this information is preloaded, there are fewer questions to respond to, making the survey that much shorter.

Attributed surveys also significantly strengthen the company’s ability to perform post-survey data analysis; the unique identifier for each respondent allows additional data to be appended, allowing for analytics on issues not addressed in the survey itself. These analyses can be used for any number of strategic purposes, such as predicting attrition, linking to group and individual performance metrics, and other projects. Because the database allows for accurate individual and group identification, additional demographic or performance data may be linked to survey responses well after the survey has been completed.
Consider the following issues before implementing an attributed survey:
- Employees may be suspicious of the data included in the survey and could feel their privacy is being compromised.
- Since they cannot see the demographic data being collected, there may be concerns that the data is inaccurate.
- Extra work is required to supply each survey-eligible employee with a unique username and password for survey access.
  - Distribution of these credentials can be tricky, and if usernames and passwords are sent to the wrong person or are shared among other employees, survey responses could be linked to the wrong demographic information.

What will it be? Anonymous or attributed?
Several factors must be taken into account when choosing a survey approach. It is important to remember there is no best answer. Depending on the circumstances, either survey type may be the right choice for a company.
- If there are trust issues within the organization, it is likely best to use an anonymous approach. A lack of trust may make employees very suspicious of an attributed approach, even if the data is managed very carefully. Establishing a record of using the survey data responsibly and in a way that carefully protects employees may allow the company to eventually move to an attributed approach.
- Internal HRIS systems may not support an attributed approach. Companies that do not have all employees on a common HRIS system will struggle with the logistics of an attributed process. Employee data may not be maintained consistently across the company, and creating the employee data file may therefore entail piecing together many individual files. This work can be time consuming, painstaking, and prone to error. Although not optimal, it is best to wait until systems are implemented company-wide and stable.

Employee concerns about the type of data being collected can be eased through a hybrid approach. Companies can elect to have employees self-select their responses to just those demographics that are considered sensitive or private, such as race, gender, and age.

Do attributed surveys lower response rates?
Not necessarily. While some companies report a slight drop in response rates when moving from an anonymous to an attributed process, we found that if the process is clearly explained to employees and the data is carefully managed, response rates will rebound to previous or higher levels. Drops in response rates may reflect increased accuracy in reporting response rates. Anonymous surveys often have inflated response rates, as employees are not prevented from taking the survey more than once and ineligible employees may participate.

A Sign of the Times
Employees in most companies understand that their use of internal company systems is permissions based, meaning that access to a given system or database is authenticated by the system; it recognizes the user and grants access. Employees understand that the company can and does track employees’ access to internal systems. Furthermore, employees also understand that the company maintains personal information about every employee, and this information is managed confidentially and in accordance with the company’s data privacy guidelines. The management of employee survey data falls under these same practices and guidelines.
In Any Case...

The integrity and reputation of any employee survey program depends on making and keeping clear commitments, particularly in the way data is managed. Regardless of whether a company chooses an anonymous or attributed process, survey communications must clearly state how access to the survey is granted, what data will be collected, how that data will be collected, and how the data will be used. Companies must develop a clear communications strategy that provides this detail and reminds employees of the company’s data privacy guidelines.

What does CEB recommend?

Where feasible, CEB recommends adopting an attributed approach to survey administration. Advances in technology with regard to HRIS systems and web-based surveys have significantly simplified the process of designing such an approach. But more importantly, there is enormous value to be gained from the highly accurate and complete data collected from these surveys and the virtually unlimited potential for insightful and strategic database analysis. An attributed process allows an employee opinion survey to become a strategic organizational research program that helps drive the company’s success.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Anonymous</th>
<th>Attributed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Results in highly accurate and/or extensive hierarchy and demographic data</td>
<td>Missing data and/or inaccurate data can result.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Impossible to determine how a specific individual responded</td>
<td></td>
<td>✗</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ease of survey administration</td>
<td>High; no special logins or credential required</td>
<td>Varies; requires special logins to be distributed and/or SSO to be set up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees can self-select what (if any) demographic data is collected.</td>
<td></td>
<td>✗ Sensitive demographics can be collected through employee response; others through HRIS data file</td>
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<tr>
<td>Requires a clean, company-wide HRIS data file</td>
<td></td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>High; thus, the recommended approach in cases of low employee trust</td>
<td>Variable, depending on how the process is structured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to link employee responses to individual metrics (e.g., performance, attrition, advancement) post-survey</td>
<td></td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to restrict/control survey access (e.g., only eligible employees, one survey per employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>Assured; impossible to link responses to a specific individual</td>
<td>With proper data restrictions, attributed surveys are confidential.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Survey Length</td>
<td></td>
<td>Allows for shorter surveys due to removal of all or some of the demographic questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗ Only if employee-level data with unique identifiers is not shared with internal groups</td>
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About CEB

CEB is the world’s leading member-based advisory company. We have a unique view into what matters—and what works—when capitalizing on drivers of business performance. With 30 years of experience working with top companies to share, analyze, and apply proven practices, we begin with great outcomes and reverse engineer to help you unlock your full potential.

Every year we equip more than 16,000 senior leaders from more than 6,000 organizations across 60 countries with the insights and actionable solutions they need to respond quickly to evolving business conditions and transform operations. We do this by combining our advanced research and analytics with best practices from clients across more than 87% of the Fortune 500, 62% of the Dow Jones Asian Titans, and 80% of the FTSE 100.

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