SURVEY AT THE TERMINAL – A CASE OF TERMINAL SURVEY?

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The web unleashes powerful tools for evaluation activity. Online surveys are increasingly popular as fast and easy ways to gather information. Yet, can they stand up in corporate environments? Firewalls, deployment in multiple sites, delegation of tasks, and building corporate memory adds further complexity to issues of security and confidentiality, especially when sensitive and strategic information is at stake.

Whilst resolving many problems, technology magnifies issues of evaluation practice that previously were taken for granted. These create new challenges for web-based applications and a new set of evaluation issues to resolve in corporate environments.

Illustrative examples will be taken from online tools and processes available on the E-valuate-IT website.

KEY WORDS: Online - Survey – Corporate – Security - Privacy

1. INTRODUCTION

Surveys are frequently undertaken in organisations, both at a formal and informal level. They are a good way of receiving quick feedback and a snapshot of opinion. They can also provide important supporting evidence for purposes of planning and decision-making. Whether driven by internal quality processes or compliance with accredited Standards (such as ISO9001:2000), corporations are more committed than ever before to evaluate their business units and program outcomes.

Web based systems open up huge potential for *cost effective* information collection and ease of *access* from any location, particularly from remote sites. Rapid survey *deployment* is now available on a scale that was never previously possible.

In the context of increasing utilization of computer mediated communication and electronic management information systems, questions have emerged about potential harmful consequences of data collection practices of various kinds. Conventional survey practices that were previously taken for granted are now also subject to increasing scrutiny. The need to justify procedures and utilization of surveys in corporate settings has never been greater or more urgent.

2. SURVEYS IN CORPORATE SETTINGS

2.1 Ad hoc and small-scale survey activity

Small-scale surveys that involve few respondents often require little in the way of resources to manage them. Quantitative answers are easy enough to tally and collate, especially with the use of spreadsheets. Where open-ended answers are involved, a quick inspection and a few well-chosen quotes in a report will often suffice.

Surveys that involve repeat questions for new respondent groups, such as induction programs and end of course feedback, may also require few resources in their management. Especially where quick feedback is provided to those with immediate interest, such as facilitators and training managers.

In these situations and from the safety of one's department or business unit, it is not uncommon that a single person is responsible for the conduct, management and direction of an entire evaluation process. Survey data and results, often confidential in nature, are typically stored at the discretion of the survey manager. Survey integrity is largely assumed.

In effect, the written report becomes the tangible record of survey activity and the ultimate repository of evaluation methodology and results.

2.2 Evaluation issues in corporate settings

The same casual approach to ad hoc and small-scale survey activity is unsustainable when undertaking substantial survey and evaluation activity.

Evaluation phases of **planning**, **design**, **collection** and **reporting** in corporate settings call for specialist skills and collaborative activity. The inherent time lag between survey construction, distribution and returns, can become all the more complex and prone to error when many people are involved in data entry and administration.

Data management takes on greater significance in context of the web. In dealing with them, questions about current practice also come under scrutiny.
Data handling issues, such as:

- Where will data be stored?
- Who has access to data?
- How will privacy and confidentiality be protected?
- Will it impact on information systems already in place?

Survey ownership issues, such as:

- Who will get to see the survey report?
- Will results be obtained in a timely manner?
- Will the survey effort be cost effective?
- How are key questions determined?

Survey integrity issues, such as:

- Will data entry be accurate?
- Will collation and analysis of results be error free?
- Can survey purposes, questions, answers and respondents be changed or hidden?
- Will surveys be tamper-proof?
- Will aggregated results only appear in reports?

These issues also raise questions about general evaluation activity and the need to integrate with organizational development. Management of evaluation activity in this context would support principles that are:
Strategic, by connecting the evaluation to organization goals/ or business results so that results are valued by others.
Transparent, so that evaluation purposes and processes are clear to others in the organization and to respondents.
Collaborative, because the cooperation of others is vital, whether working together on tasks to support the evaluation process, or by answering survey questions honestly.
Ethical, by ensuring the evaluation process conforms to accepted standards of conduct.
Accountable, shaped by a frame of reference and protocols that are accessible and repeatable.

2.3. Web Technology

Web technology can be seductive. Real reductions in time and cost through automation of evaluation processes may tempt users into believing that tools create a protective layer of neutrality and objectivity that legitimize results and evaluation outcomes.

Clearly, technology exists in a context of use and tools can "mediate the social relations, operations and findings of an evaluation activity differently depending on evaluators' different purposes, approaches, or methods" (Gay & Bennington, 1999, p.8).

However, the issue most closely associated with electronic based tools is the ethical concern regarding potential harmful consequences. "Many types of unobtrusive, computer mediated data collection practices potentially raise questions of surveillance, 'dataveillance', privacy rights, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality" (Bennington, 1999, p.87).

3. WEB BASED EVALUATION TOOL

With these considerations in mind, the **E-valuate-IT** web tool, at www.e-valuate-it.com, was built to support evaluation activity in corporate settings. **E-valuate-IT** is an online application that enables users to create, manage, distribute and report surveys using a simple web browser. It provides high protection security and confidentiality, tamper proof survey results and access privileges to all parts of the program that allow delegation of tasks.

Its features demonstrate some of the power available through the web as well as the need to integrate evaluation process within an application design.

3.1 Web Enabled Features

The following issues are not exclusive to the web but are magnified because of the repercussions of not adequately addressing them.

3.11 Security

To avoid exposure from uninvited and unwelcome interference with transmitted data security must be actively implemented and managed

Secure web space can be achieved using data encryption technology that protects transmissions before they are sent over the Internet and can only be decoded at the destination, thus protecting the information in transit. Firewalls can be implemented to protect local area networks from outside Internet access, and to protect Servers from unauthorized access. Password protection further restricts access to web space.

E-valuate-IT operates on a stand-alone Server that sits behind a Firewall. Password-protected Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) encryption safety is used to ensure restricted access to surveys and privacy. One can also bring in other parties and assign them passwords that entitle them to various levels of access and functionality in the program so that collaboration and delegation of tasks is possible.

E-valuate-IT administrators have security options that allow a broad range of survey types. Respondent lists can be created in advance for uniquely generated username and password entry, or respondent lists can be created at the point of survey entry from validated logins.

3.12 Privacy

To avoid misuse of one's personal details following information provided to a site, or disclosure of one's identity that is traceable following a visit to a site, that could be shared or sold without consent to third parties, active policies must be in place

Privacy policies are commonly displayed on websites to inform visitors and users how they can expect information to be handled.

The Privacy Statement forms part of the **E-valuate-IT** Terms and Conditions and sets out protections and safeguards of personal information, policy about unsolicited promotion or advertising, dissemination of personal information, and storage of information in a secure environment.

3.13 Confidentiality

To avoid unwarranted access and unwelcome opportunity to view private information, protective mechanisms need to be built into program systems

Online surveys seem attractive because of the expectation there will be protections in place to prevent the viewing of individual questionnaires or linking individual questionnaires to individual respondents. This cannot be taken for granted.

E-valuate-IT treats confidentiality as the highest priority. Responses are reported as aggregate results. This means that individual responses remain anonymous and totally confidential at all times. Similarly, any written comments are collated and grouped. There is no access to individual questionnaires.

There are flexible choices in the levels of anonymity available to survey administrators to manage.

a) The survey can be designed so that only anonymous responses may be submitted.
b) The survey can be designed so that respondents are given the option of responding to a survey anonymously or by identifying themselves through the provision of personal details. In corporate settings there may be occasions where respondents provide sensitive information and may wish to be identified or followed up.

Whatever level of anonymity is chosen, responses are not attributed to any individual in any report generated by the application. In the case of open-ended responses, listed answers are grouped (coded) into their response categories.

Even in the case where respondents have chosen to identify themselves, their identity is known only during the coding process (whereby open-ended responses are assigned a category that best fits the answer). In this instance people with access rights to the coding part of the application may view specific responses. Responses are not attributed in any report generated by the application.

3.2 Evaluation Features

The following features are specific to the **E-valuate-IT** system and are intended to enhance and integrate evaluation practice in corporate settings.

3.21 Knowledge Support System

To ensure that common procedures and processes can be shared

The ability to build protocols that are organization-specific and project-specific provides a valuable resource that can be shared and re-used. Protocols can document methodology, practice, policy, sampling, and theoretic orientation. In fact, anything that is useful in centralizing information for the survey. Protocols help to build corporate memory and ensure that common policies, standards and methodologies are in place.

To enable the sharing of coding tasks and provide accountability, the protocols section displays all codes for all respondent groups. These can be edited and comments included so that its purpose is made clear. Protocols also provide a reference point for dealing with ambiguous or difficult items so that a consistent approach to assigning codes can be assured.

3.22 Management Support System

To ensure a complete workflow for the design, management, distribution and reporting of surveys

Successful administration of electronic surveys depends on the management of project details, survey branding, respondent lists, advance emails, survey cover page, completion dates, distribution to respondents, reminder emails and survey website location.

Administrators can bring in other parties and assign them different levels of access and functionality for true online collaboration and delegation of tasks

3.23 Data Integrity

To ensure surveys are tamper proof and facilitate confidence in results critical elements of survey projects become permanently archived

E-valuate-IT protects surveys once they have been distributed. Survey questions are locked and cannot be 'edited' further. Survey purpose and focus statements, survey cover page and emails are also preserved.
There still remains flexibility in accessing and enhancing the survey project. This includes the ability to review, preview and print questions; add respondents and re-distribute the survey; edit the coding categories and reassign codes; create and edit protocols; create and edit reminders; and create and export reports.

3.24 Real time reports

To ensure instant reports of survey results as soon as they come in

Real time reports are available instantly. Reports are created from survey data in relation to each respondent group. Descriptive statistics provide powerful quantitative and qualitative results. These include summary tables (frequency, mean and standard deviation); charts (bar chart and pie chart); open-ended answers (summary table, list of grouped answers and list of unprocessed answers); and cross tabulation of summary results across respondent groups and by respondent attributes. Reports can be exported to Microsoft Excel and HTML formats.

3.25 Flexible Survey Design

To enable full control of question design to multiple respondent groups

Survey administrators have full control of question text; question types (open-ended, multiple choice - single answer, multiple choice - multiple answer, dichotomous, scale and estimates); question order; and headings to organise the survey into logical sections. Surveys are designed online and can be edited any number of times until ready to distribute. Survey codes for managing open-ended questions can be edited at any time including during the reporting stage.
Multiple respondent groups, requiring different questions or wording, can be accommodated on the one survey. Each respondent group will only see online the questions that apply to them.

4. HOW E-VALUATE-IT WORKS

The **E-valuate-IT** system consists of three functional areas: Design, Administer, and Report; and two support areas: Protocols and Security.

Design	Creates questionnaires for multiple respondent groups
Administer	Distributes survey to respondents
Report	Creates report summaries of results

Protocols	Repository to document and share policies, procedures, outcomes
Security	Grants access rights to various users

The electronic workflow can be represented as follows:

Project and Survey Details

Describe survey purpose and focus
Select survey type
Design survey branding
Build protocols

The first step in getting started with **E-valuate-IT** is simple and easy. To begin, start a new project and enter your project details. This includes your contact details and title of the project. The next step is to start your survey.

Manage Respondents

Create Respondent Groups
Attributes to cross-tabulate
Add Respondents
Import Respondent list

The respondent section allows you to create multiple respondent groups. You can add respondents one at a time or import lists. **E-valuate-IT** provides you a downloadable Excel sheet to make this easy. Surveys can be constructed to target questions at specific respondent groups.

Manage Questions

Assign question type
Assign respondent group to questions
Preview and print questions

E-valuate-IT allows you to restrict questions to specific respondent groups, flag a question to be compulsory and add in annotations to assist in question clarity. The duplicate facility allows you to complete questions even faster.

Review and Approve

Provide access privileges to any part of the program
Collaborate, consult and delegate tasks

Use the security system to grant access to reviewers so that questions can be added, deleted, or edited to ensure that key questions are framed in collaboration with stakeholder interests.

Administer and Distribute

Create covering email
Create survey greeting page
Link to own website
Distribute or activate survey
Monitor progress and send reminders
Add additional respondents

The administer section of **E-valuate-IT** enables you to prepare your survey for distribution or activation, as well as monitor and add further respondents after distribution.

Respond

Secure URL
Tamper proof responses
Confidentiality and Privacy

The response interface supports all major browsers. **E-valuate-IT** only displays questions that are applicable to each respondent group and identifies compulsory questions to be answered. The interface is secure and tamper proof.

Report

Online Summary Tables
Quantitative and qualitative results
Pie and Bar charts in real time
Cross tabulated results

Once the first respondents complete the survey you can commence generating reports. Cross-tabulate responses across respondent groups and compare attributes within each respondent group.

Export

Results export as HTML and MS Excel

Export for further analysis and storage.

Figure 1. E-valuate-IT Online Survey Process

Evaluation principles referred above that are strategic, transparent, collaborative, ethical, accountable and consistent have influenced the model on which this application was built and are sustained throughout the application.

The protocols area provides opportunity for valuable information to be centralized and shared in support of all these principles. The rationale behind mandatory purpose statements that appear in emails and survey cover pages is to provide transparency to both users and respondents. The ability to collaborate with others enables a joint approach to workflow as well as provides the possibility of fully involving stakeholders and their interests.

5. CONCLUSION

Program evaluation aims to provide useful information about initiatives undertaken by an organization for purposes of decision-making, planning, improvement and accountability. Whether online surveys will create new awareness of evaluation process or unleash survey frenzy remains to be seen.

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