

# Counting on Co-op Employees

## Measuring staff satisfaction through employee surveys

BY CAROLEE COLTER AND MARY CORTEAU

**C**o-op managers want to know how their employees feel about the co-op as an employer. Increasingly, they are turning to employee surveys as a tool to measure staff satisfaction.

Moreover, as more co-op boards of directors take up Policy Governance, they often ask managers to include data from employee surveys in monitoring reports on staff treatment.

Between 1992 and 2002, Carolee Colter conducted 24 surveys for co-ops and reported on the results in “Are Co-op Employees More Satisfied? Surveys Say So” (July–August 2002 *Cooperative Grocer*). As that title indicates, employee satisfaction appeared to be increasing over the course of those 10 years.

Over the next several years, between 2003 and 2008, we amassed a wealth of data while conducting another 50 surveys. Some of these were repeat surveys for co-ops that take the pulse of their employees every two or three years. In this article, we’ll share the areas of greatest satisfaction and dissatisfaction, the trends of the past six years compared to the previous 10, and some subtle but intriguing differences between larger and smaller co-ops.

### How does it work?

In all surveys, we strive for 100 percent participation of eligible staff, to ensure that the results reflect the opinions of *all* the staff and are not skewed by self-selection. Usually, we get between 90 and 100 percent. In general, we find that co-op employees are quite willing to share their opinions. We’ve also been greatly aided by the professionalism and diligence of the human resources managers or other designated staff who work with us to coordinate survey logistics.

Our surveys provide statements to which employees are asked to respond by choosing a number score:

- 5 for “strongly agree”
- 4 for “agree”
- 3 for “partly agree/partly disagree”
- 2 for “disagree”
- 1 for “strongly disagree”

*Complete versions of the charts shown here, along with the article by Carolee Colter and Mary Corteau, can be found on our website: [www.cooperativegrocer.coop](http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop).*

**Table 1**

	Medians 1992–2002	Medians 2003–08	Change
I have access to the information I need to do my job.	3.53	4.03	+0.50
I received well-planned and useful on-the-job training.	3.29	3.70	+0.41
I see a clear link between my work and the co-op’s mission and goals.	3.59	3.97	+0.38
I have been evaluated on schedule/in a timely manner.	3.04	3.40	+0.36
I get adequate notice of changes affecting my job.	3.38	3.73	+0.35
Everyone at the co-op is working toward the same vision for the co-op / same organizational goals.	2.84	3.19	+0.35
I get helpful, timely feedback from my supervisor so that I can improve my performance.	3.61	3.92	+0.31
Store operations are efficient and well run.	3.36	3.66	+0.30
The policies in the employee handbook are applied fairly and consistently.	3.40	3.68	+0.28
The employee handbook is informative, clear and useful to me.	3.66	3.93	+0.27
My pay increases reflect the quality of my performance and level of my responsibility.	3.16	3.43	+0.27
When conflicts arise at the co-op, they are effectively resolved.	3.00	3.24	+0.24
I believe the co-op operates consistently with the cooperative principles.	3.56	3.79	+0.23
Management promptly addresses performance problems.	3.08	3.28	+0.20
The staff discount meets my needs/is valuable to me.	4.53	4.34	–0.20
The paid time off [or vacation and sick leave] benefit meets my needs/is valuable to me.	4.29	4.09	–0.20

Keep in mind that  
surveys measure perceptions,  
not facts.

If a survey taker has no opinion on a statement, s/he is asked to not select any response. The higher the average score, the more positive employees feel about the specific subject described in the statement.

Based on our experience, we consider an average score of 4.00 or higher to indicate very high satisfaction, an area of strength in the view of co-op staff. Scores between 3.50 and 4.00 reflect relative satisfaction. If scores approach

or go below 3.00, they point to areas of marked dissatisfaction.

On statements related to a particular staff treatment policy, we consider a score of 3.25 to be the minimum to demonstrate compliance. That score would indicate that more employees agree with the statement than disagree. However, for statements involving discrimination and harassment, we set 3.75 as the minimum to demonstrate compliance. Unlike other issues where one person’s opinion is equal to every other’s, we think those in a minority could experience discrimination or harassment that the majority does not perceive. (We created these standards for demonstrating compliance in collaboration with the Cooperative Board Leadership Development program.)

Keep in mind that surveys measure perceptions, not facts. Therefore, survey results

should always be accompanied by other data in creating a monitoring report for Policy Governance or in producing summaries of workplace conditions.

To interpret the results for an individual co-op, we look at standard deviation. High standard deviation indicates that there is a wide diversity of opinion among survey participants, while low standard deviation shows that there is general agreement on a response. We also randomly select a sample of the participating staff for follow-up interviews, where we ask questions designed to reveal some of the reasons behind the survey scores. The percentage interviewed varies with the size of the workforce.

### Looking for trends

In order to compare scores across co-ops, we determined the median score among all the co-ops we are comparing for each individual statement on a survey. The median represents the point at which half of the scores are higher and half are lower.

We compared the median scores on 60 statements from 24 surveys conducted between 1992 and 2002 and from 50 surveys conducted between 2003 and 2008. Table 1 shows the statements with the greatest change between the earlier and later groups of surveys, ranked by the degree of change.

What we found is a continuing trend of gradually increasing employee satisfaction. On two-fifths of the 60 statements, the median scores of the 2003–2008 surveys were 20 basis points or more above the older surveys. On only six of the 60 statements did the scores decline, and only two by as much as 20 basis points.

Survey statements are divided into 10 major topics describing key components of the workplace. When we compare the overall topic scores, we see improvement on each of them, most notably in communications and human resources practices.

Certain benefits—staff discount, paid time off, and profit sharing—earned very positive responses. At the same time, the two statements with the greatest decrease in median scores (20 basis points) were about staff purchase discount and paid time off. Still, both scores were well above 4.00.

We expected to see a decrease in satisfaction with medical insurance, given the deterioration in coverage and services that has confronted small businesses in the U.S. However, the median was 3.84, only 5 points lower than the 1992–2002 surveys. The median doesn't tell the full story, given the diversity of medical insurance benefits (or lack of them) among co-ops; responses to this statement ranged from 2.26 to 4.80.

It is discouraging to see even a modest decline (11 basis points) on the statement, "I've been given information so that I can talk knowledgeably about co-ops with customers." On the other hand, the score on, "I believe the co-op

operates consistently with the cooperative principles," increased by twice as much.

### Where is the greatest satisfaction?

Table 2 shows the statements with the highest and lowest median scores among the 50 surveys conducted between 2003 and 2008. Considering that half of the survey results were higher than the median scores, this table is a remarkable statement of employees' pride in their work, their departments, their customer service, and their co-ops.

Many statements that describe communication—between managers and staff and among coworkers—scored favorably. Some of the most significant increases in median scores between the older and the more recent surveys were tied to improved communication.

The median scores on two statements about discrimination ("Employees are treated fairly regardless of age, sex, race, disability, etc." and "The co-op's work environment is free from discrimination and harassment.") were far above the minimum for compliance with staff treatment policies. Also note the high score ■>

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**Table 2**

	Median 2003–08
<b>H I G H E S T scoring statements</b>	
The staff discount benefit meets my needs / is valuable to me.	4.34
I am proud to work for the co-op.	4.27
My department produces high-quality work.	4.24
Employees are treated fairly regardless of age, sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, disability, parental and marital status, and veterans status.”	4.21
The co-op provides high-quality customer service.	4.20
I get the cooperation I need from the people in my department.	4.15
I would recommend the co-op as a good place to work.	4.12
At the co-op, we are always striving for continuous improvement.	4.11
The paid time off [vacation and sick leave] benefit meets my needs / is valuable to me.	4.09
My supervisor encourages us to share our ideas, suggestions and concerns.”	4.08
My working conditions are safe.	4.07
The co-op’s work environment is free from illegal discrimination and harassment.	4.05
<b>L O W E S T scoring statements</b>	
I understand and am satisfied with the process for determining pay raises.	3.37
Management promptly addresses performance problems.	3.28
Corrective action is handled fairly and consistently.	3.26
When conflicts arise at the co-op, they are effectively resolved.	3.24
Everyone at the co-op is working toward the same vision for the co-op / same organizational goals.	3.19

**Table 3**

	Median scores of co-ops with 60 or fewer staff	Median scores of co-ops with more than 60 staff	Difference between scores
I understand and am satisfied with the process for determining pay raises.	3.65	3.32	-0.43
The wage scale is applied fairly and consistently.	3.56	3.25	-0.31
I feel I can approach management with concerns.	3.89	3.61	-0.28
I am fairly paid for the work I do relative to other opportunities in the local area.	3.80	3.53	-0.27
I have been evaluated on schedule/in a timely manner.	3.62	3.36	-0.26
I get the cooperation I need from people in other departments.	4.06	3.83	-0.23
Employees are treated fairly regardless of age, sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, disability, parental and marital status, and veterans status.	4.32	4.14	-0.18
Everyone at the co-op is working toward the same vision for the co-op / same organizational goals.	3.27	3.10	-0.17
Management encourages employees to share their ideas, suggestions and concerns / to give input into how their work is done.	4.02	3.85	-0.17
I received well-planned and useful on-the-job training.	3.58	3.72	+0.14
The profit-sharing [bonus] plan recognizes the contributions of all staff to the success of the co-op.	4.03	4.20	+0.17
I’ve been given information so that I can talk knowledgeably about co-ops with customers.	3.67	3.95	+0.28

◀ on the statement about safe working conditions, another area frequently covered by board policies on staff treatment.

**Where is the greatest dissatisfaction?**

While the median has increased by 24 basis points since 2002 on the statement, “When conflicts arise at the co-op, they are effectively resolved,” and increased by 35 basis points on the statement, “Everyone at the co-op is working toward the same vision for the co-op (or same organizational goals),” both of these overall scores are still well below 3.50. These low scores aren’t too surprising. The business structure co-ops operate under means that there are many stakeholders to satisfy. Co-ops seem to attract people who feel passionately about social and environmental goals but can’t always agree how to achieve them.

Statements about corrective action continued to score fairly low, although there has been some modest improvement in staff perception of fairness, consistency, and timeliness. Perhaps

these statements may never score in the high satisfaction range because the confidentiality surrounding disciplinary actions feeds the rumor mill and raises employee anxiety. Nevertheless, these scores indicate that improvement is possible.

While benefits scored high, statements about pay did not. Despite the efforts of many co-ops to pay a livable wage, the median score on “I am fairly paid for the work I do relative to other opportunities in the local area” increased only marginally. The score on “I understand and am satisfied with the process for determining pay raises” actually fell below the pre-2002 median. “My pay increases reflect the quality of my performance and level of my responsibility” did significantly improve (by 27 basis points) but is still below 3.50.

**Larger co-ops vs. smaller co-ops**

Table 3 compares results between 24 surveys of co-ops with 60 or fewer employees and 26 co-ops with more than 60 staff.

On three compensation-related issues, employees in smaller co-ops showed significantly greater satisfaction: pay rates in relation to the local area, the pay scale within the co-op, and the basis for raises. It also appears that employee evaluations are conducted in a more timely fashion in smaller stores.

As we might expect in smaller organizations, the median scores indicate that management feels more approachable, relations with other departments are more cooperative, people feel more encouraged to give input, and they are more confident that that input will make a difference. In general, we get the impression that employees in smaller workforces are more likely to perceive management as fair or at least to give management the benefit of the doubt.

Where larger co-ops fared better were in the areas of on-the-job training, profit-sharing and education about co-ops.

### In a nutshell

The trend of increasing employee satisfaction continues. We surmise that much of this overall improvement is a result of the collaborative efforts of co-ops across the country to raise the bar for operations, management and governance.

By the end of 2009, we will be able to offer employee satisfaction surveys using new tools developed by CoopMetrics. These will allow us to conduct surveys online with confidentiality, security, and flexibility, while retaining our existing data from previous surveys. Down the road, survey results can be integrated into CoopMetrics data, giving us more insights into how employee satisfaction impacts the financial bottom line. ■

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