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Make sure you get the most from your 360 degree feedback

We share our ten key areas for consideration to help ensure the successful implementation of a 360° feedback programme.

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Version 1.0 August 2014

In this article, Filip Hrkal, Managing Director of *cut-e* Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), shares his experience and thoughts on how to ensure your 360° feedback delivers the most impact for your people and your company.

Filip Hrkal studied for his MBA marketing and human resources management in Barcelona. After a number of internships in Germany and Israel focusing on the use of online assessment in HRM and Workforce Management, his career in HR started at Hudson Global Resources and CDS Consulting.

In 2007, Filip became the co-founder of *cut-e* in the CEE region. He now works with clients to ensure that the implementation of *cut-e's* technology delivers value and he is involved in the design and implementation of Assessment and Development Centre projects as well as in-depth HR audits.

Filip is recognised as an expert in the implementation of psychometrics across Central and Eastern Europe.

360° feedback programmes to make a difference

Deciding to deploy a 360° feedback programme could be one of the most valuable decisions you as an HR, Personnel or Learning and Development professional make.

However, without a successful implementation, a 360° programme may be seen as an irksome and time-consuming task. Below are what we see as the 10 key areas for consideration to make your 360° feedback a success.

1. Prepare, plan and communicate

Preparation is one of the most important areas of 360° feedback implementation – and yet it is often the area on which people spend relatively little time. It is important not to look at the 360° activity feedback merely as one of acquiring and evaluating data, but to view it as a holistic process at the centre of which is the assessed person.

This may be a new activity for your organisation and often the most successful implementations are where companies introduce 360° feedback by first carrying it out with senior managers. This not only demonstrates the commitment to openness and transparency to the wider organisation, but also creates buy-in from the management levels. If you have not yet seen the benefits of 360°, before you embark on this, now is the time to consider:

- How you intend to use the information to help your employees, managers and the business.
- The key messages you want to get across which support this implementation – and those you do not. For example, there may be misperceptions as to 360°'s use. It is not – and must never be – a 'disciplinary' tool and you may need to communicate this more strongly if there has been a culture of this in the past.
- The training or familiarisation people may need to complete the 360 questionnaire as a rater – and as a participant.
- How the scores will be analysed, interpreted and reported on.
- The roles of each of the key stakeholders – and the vehicles you will use to communicate this.
- The timeline for communication.

If you choose to use an external consulting company to work with you on the project, it is useful to have a kick-off or initial meeting at which the person who is then implementing the project and possibly providing feedback to the assessed people is present. This gives you the additional advantage of drawing on the experience of someone who has not only managed many feedbacks, including those which are more complicated, but is also able to answer questions and to motivate those involved to be honest and open when filling out and answering all the questions in the questionnaire.

If the person implementing the feedback has experience, he or she will be able to help you define when the feedback should be started, after what period of time to send out reminders, and advise on other aspects which make a real difference to the quality and level of data acquired.

Those companies which have experience in implementing thousands of feedbacks across many programmes are able to predict when those taking part complete feedback most carefully and when they may have a tendency for speed and do not consider the feedback they are giving.

2. Move 360° online – and decide how to best administer and manage the process, getting external help if you need it.

Administration of the 360° process can be managed either by the internal HR department should it deploy an online system which allows it to do this – but beware of the so-called 'spreadsheet solution' (see Point 4) – or by appointing a project supplier and manager who undertakes to manage and deliver results.

When looking for an online 360° system, use the capability checklist below to ensure it supports the professional administration across all stages of the feedback process by:

- Creating a competency model;
- Creating a set of questions with multiple-choice answers;
- Creating open-ended questions;
- Adding all participants and assigning them to the relevant categories;
- Selecting which competencies will be rated and by using which (common) scale;
- Automatically sending an invitation e-mail with access data;
- Automatically sending reminders for those slowing down or holding up the process;
- Generating individual reports;
- Generating the final report of the whole team;
- Combining several languages in one process (e.g. administration in Czech, report in English);
- Allowing for smooth instantaneous administration by an unlimited number of people;
- Creating a rating of the significance of competencies (see below);
- Automatically linking with psychometrics, which independently measure the same competencies as the feedback (see below);
- Adopting your corporate colours and 'look and feel'.

3. If necessary, appoint a provider – which is professional, reliable, accountable and has a track record.

When selecting a provider make sure that its system is able to manage all the steps mentioned above, and meets the need for ease of use and has guaranteed 24/7 availability.

You should look for: free updates as standard; payment only for assessments that are carried out (not for the system as it is; licences are a thing of the past); that there is a possibility to implement corporate colours and – this is becoming increasingly important – meets all legal requirements for data protection.

4. Beware of taking a 'quick and inexpensive' spreadsheet approach. It could undermine your entire 360° process as well as data protection law, anonymity and trust.

We have seen through our work the impact that the lack of thought and planning has on and the damage it brings to the 360° process – and indeed employee trust. We have had experience of an HR manager who sent out the 360° spreadsheet across the company without any prior communication and asked all interested parties to fill in the answers and evaluations. After these were returned to him, he analysed the data himself. Data protection law, speed of analysis, accuracy of evaluation and data anonymity were put to one side. So how can you do it better?

Use a system that is designed exactly for this purpose. It will no doubt be online – so it is not necessary to install anything anywhere as connection is via a web browser from any computer, tablet or smartphone connected to the internet. Furthermore, access to data is strictly secure and uses similar technologies to those that are used for online banking.

5. Focus on the important competencies for each position and rater.

Competency models vary in their sophistication – and there are consultants who can work with you to help define your own model. However, most modern, online 360° feedback systems allow you to access and work with a standard competency model such as *cut-e shapes* 18 – as well as working easily with any existing client competency model.

As you design the questionnaire, you will probably want to determine which competencies the rater is able to assess – as typically not all raters assess or rate all the competency areas. This is an important stage as it recognises that not everyone is able to comment on, or observe, a specific competency. For example, if we use the example question (statement) "Motivates his/her subordinates in an appropriate way" which is looking at how a behaviour linked to the competency of 'people management' is demonstrated, external customers will not be able to rate this competency, although both a superior or subordinate will.

cut-e has developed an innovative approach rating the significance of competencies. The functionality of our system involves the manager and the person to be rated, to both consider independently each of the competencies in the competency model and the extent to which it is important for success in the given job role. This means that, even before feedback has been given, the important stakeholders (the manager and the direct report) have considered how they each perceive the position. For example, a person may perceive that innovative thinking is not important in his or her role and yet the line manager expects innovation of thought. If the performance in this area is assessed as being only average by those rating, then this indicates where improvement needs to be.

Most contemporary online systems enable you to determine quickly with the click of a button which competencies from the given competency model the rater will rate. Similarly, when filling out the assessment, the rater is often able to select the option 'I cannot rate' for selected questions.

6. Ensure anonymity of the questionnaire – and put processes in place to support this.

The design of the questionnaire is important but over and above the questions themselves, you will need to ensure anonymity of the raters – and make sure this is communicated, understood and adhered to.

Often the open-ended, free text questions can contain 'clues' as to the identity of the rater – and you may like to alert raters to this in the briefing or training of them. We even suggest that when questions are completed in a different language, they are translated into the local language or the language in which the majority of the comments are written so that anonymity can be further protected.

7. Focus rater attention by choosing the most appropriate assessment scale for your questionnaire – and include open and multiple-choice answers in the questionnaire to get qualitative and quantitative data.

There are many available assessment scales you can use in the design of the questionnaire. A five-point scale is well-understood from the school and education system, but in practice leads to a tendency by raters to score towards the centre or mid-point, as we are drawn towards an 'average'. To compensate, scales with an even number of points force the rater choose one or other of the options (i.e. whether the statement applies or does not apply to the given person).

You can supplement multiple-choice questions with more open-ended questions and allow for free text. The standard example of this is, "What else would you like to add or include about the person you are rating that you have not yet had the opportunity to express?"

There is a wealth of recommended questions and scales to be used and professional consultants should be able to help you select the most appropriate for your questionnaire.

8. Understand that rater selection is key.

Raters should be selected with great care. They cannot be defined based solely on the company's organisational chart and therefore it is important to consider whether the rated person and the rater really interact with each other and whether the rater is able to make an informed and realistic assessment based on actual practice and experience.

Where possible, encourage and empower the participant – or the person to be rated – to select his or her own raters. You may want to include an 'approval' check of these people but if you provided clear guidelines as to who makes for a good rater, most participants will embrace this. Some organisations also encourage raters to come forward and 'volunteer' themselves to give feedback for specific individuals with whom they have regular contact and for whom they can offer relevant comment, observation and feedback. This offers a more proactive approach to providing feedback rather than the raters waiting to be approached. It also represents the more fluid and dynamic project structures of today's working practice where people may be part of several teams or groups.

The number of raters selected is important: ideally about 6–15. There can be more, especially when in more complex cases where a comprehensive view is necessary, or in cases where there are only a small number of people being assessed. This is because, when raters provide feedback on more people, and each assessment takes approximately 15–20 minutes, the motivation and concentration of the rater, and therefore the reliability of the data, decreases.

9. Get the process right.

How does administration of a great 360° work in practice? If the HR or personnel manager has adopted an online system from a good supplier, he or she is likely to have a system into which he or she logs in, sets up the project, and selects the competencies the company wants to monitor either from a custom-built or standard model. The names of the individual people to be rated are entered and either the raters are allocated or the individual can select their own.

You can, with the more sophisticated systems, look at and interrogate the text offered by the raters in the open and closed questions, so the process can also be used for looking at opinions and monitoring the company climate. Furthermore, it's valuable to deploy a system which informs the raters and the participant about the stages of the feedback process and the outstanding actions.

The report should be available immediately – and typically, language options will be available – so wherever the assessment has taken place, you are able to read the report in your preferred language.

The output of the feedback should be clearly structured and a comprehensive report is likely to include a graphic comparing the assessments or ratings of all those involved, a best match assessment and a view of the ratings with the greatest differences. The report should offer an easy to read overview of strengths, the opportunities for development, the areas of untapped potential and highlight the so-called 'grey zone' – the areas in which the candidate does not excel, but does not have to for the current role.

Group reports are also usually of great value as these help you to compare teams or groups of people.

10. View the feedback as the building block to development.

The entire feedback process is worth little if the feedback is not correctly communicated to the participant and there is no further development of him or her. How the feedback facilitator provides the feedback and coaching advice to the recipient is very important. Typically, talking through the report and communicating feedback takes between 60–90 minutes and this meeting is attended by the feedback facilitator, the feedback recipient and, in some cases, the manager of the participant or an HR professional.

In many cases, and for the majority of employees, it is sufficient for feedback to be given by a trained and experienced HR professional from within the company but for more senior-level managers or in more complicated cases where the feedback reveals more serious issues, it is recommended that feedback is provided by an independent expert as this usually leads to greater acceptance.

The key element to getting a return on investment in 360° is to ensure that the feedback is used, understood and acted upon. If the assessment is thrown into a desk drawer after completing it, it is a waste of both money and time of all involved, but also the participant will be disappointed that it gave little to take further and develop, leading to poor engagement in future processes and, indeed, those sceptical of the process will have the ammunition to weaken any future 360° programme.

The 360° assessment should act as a foundation for dialogue with the employee and highlight the areas for development. It can also be used to consider and track progress as the assessment can be repeated every 1–2 years.

For more information and related documents about how to get the most out of Online Assessment, validity, and other related information please refer to www.cut-e.com.

cut-e is world leader in the design and implementation of innovative online tests and questionnaires for recruitment, selection and development. *cut-e* helps companies identify people with the right capabilities and cultural fit to deliver optimal business results. *cut-e* carries out over 4 million assessments per year in over 70 countries and 40 languages.