GUIDE

The step-by-step plan to creating an employee listening strategy

interact

Want a more innovative, engaged workforce? Listen, carefully

The data is clear that for an organization to thrive, it needs to create a culture of engagement and innovation.

Companies with engaged workers consistently outperform disengaged companies on nearly every metric. Gallup found that engaged workplaces:

- Have customers who are 10% more satisfied

- Drive company profitability by 22%

- Are 21% more productive

If that weren't enough, they also have lower staff turnover, less shrinkage, a third less absenteeism, and fewer safety incidents or quality defects.

Just as crucially, engaged employees drive greater innovation. They submit new ideas to cut costs and conserve resources, and they drive the development of new products and services.

So, whether you're a CEO looking to streamline costs or a CHRO hoping to make people more satisfied at work, you need to drive greater engagement and then listen to the employee ideas that can make a difference.
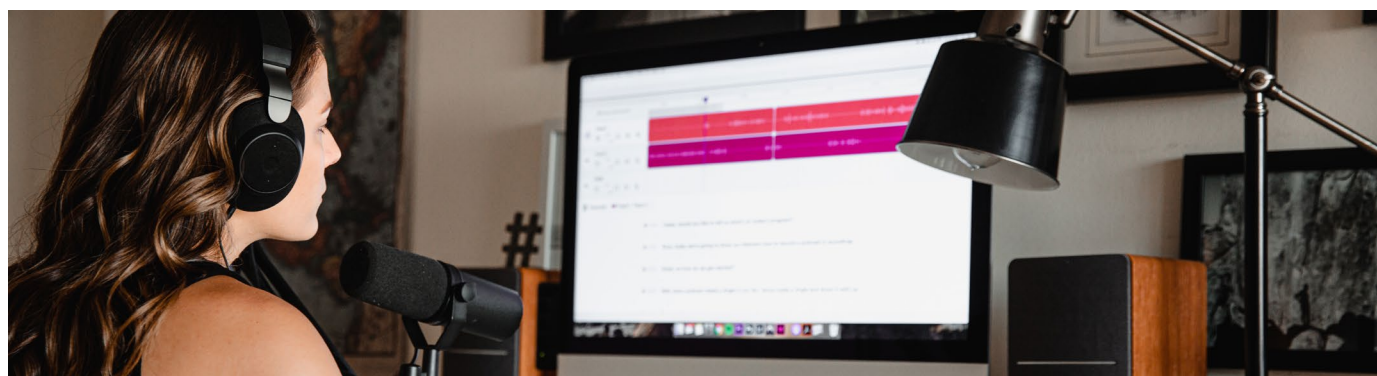
Drive engagement through employee listening

Raising engagement is a complex subject, so if you or your team has been tasked with improving employee engagement and innovation – or if you're the one doing the tasking – where should you start?

One place to begin is with **employee listening.** If you're new to the concept, this guide is your complete plan to creating an employee listening strategy that can improve outcomes for an organization and its workforce.

Employee ideas in action

3M

3M scientist Spencer Silver's invention — a sticky, but not solid, adhesive — went without use for years until Art Fry, a fellow 3M employee, needed a bookmark that would stick to the paper without damaging the pages.

Once they found themselves writing messages on their new notes to communicate around the office, they realized the full potential of the idea.

> I thought, what we have here isn't just a bookmark. It's a whole new way to communicate.
> - Art Fry

Post-it Notes now generate some $1 billion annually and dominate the market.

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What is the point of listening?

Creating a positive and engaged workplace through listening is beneficial – and justifies the investment – in at least two main ways:

- Feeling heard and valued (a product of listening) is not only intrinsically valuable for people, but it also improves engagement. Research by The Workforce Institute at UKG demonstrated that **74% of employees say they feel more effective and engaged when they 'feel heard' at work.**

- Listening is functionally important for every area of a business (including sales, customer service, and innovation) because having immediate feedback loops allows an organization to make changes and innovate faster, leading to increased profitability.

  The same report found that organizations are more likely to perform well financially (88%) when their employees feel heard and engaged. Whether you need to improve a current product offering or an internal Learning Management System, continuous listening can help.

Given the obvious advantages of creating a culture of continuous listening, organizations should already be focused on uplifting staff and increasing business outcomes through these EX-focused techniques. But the data shows that's not the case.

According to Gallup, although employees want to give their feedback, only three in 10 US employees strongly agree that at work their opinions seem to count.

The Workforce Institute at UKG found that 83% of employees feel that they are not heard fairly or equally at work. The survey also found that 47% of employees believe that underrepresented voices are not being heard, while 60% believe their views and opinions are ignored in the workplace.

Why do workforces feel silenced? In most cases because employers either have no listening techniques and technologies in place, or because they see an annual eNPS survey as 'enough'.

Listening isn't one-and-done. If you want to listen in a structured and scalable way that raises engagement and inspires innovation, you need to create a continuous process involving communication, feedback, action, and management.

This guide contains steps to help your organization put that beneficial feedback loop in place. Let's get listening.

Elements of an employee listening strategy

Setting the scene

- Psychological safety
- Communication
- Anonymity
- Realism about action
- Transparency

Tools and technologies

- Surveys and questionnaires
- Feedback gathering
- Social listening
- Small meetings
- Focus groups and ERGs

Active listening skills

- Paying attention
- Being present
- Empathetic listening
- Open-ended questions
- Summarizing
- Training for managers
- Senior leaders

Following up

- Communicating action
- Continuous listening
- Reviewing processes
- Elevating results

1. Setting the scene for a listening strategy

Before doing the hard work necessary to establish and deliver an employee listening strategy, it's essential to prepare everyone for any changes to your current processes.

This section outlines some of the necessary steps to set the stage for successful employee listening.

Developing an employee listening plan

As with any project requiring stakeholders and resources, it's best to start with a high-level plan of objectives and intended outcomes.

If you want your listening and feedback strategy to be more than a single survey that changes nothing, you need to consider how the strategy will be implemented and who will deliver it over the long term.

Start by asking these questions.

What is the scope?

The scope of your strategy will govern its delivery.

For example, an enterprise organization with thousands of global employees will be materially different from a regional retailer with a few hundred workers, so start with who you are going to listen to.

Will it be all employees, specific departments, or certain locations only?

This will impact the channels you use and the frequency of feedback gathering.

What are the objectives?

If the goal of your strategy is to improve employee experience so that you reduce voluntary turnover, you may wish to create separate objectives for each stage of the EX lifecycle.

For instance, this may include creating a smoother onboarding process or ensuring your learning and development programs encourage employee satisfaction. By pinpointing stages of listening, you can turn objectives into action.

How will you listen?

Channel choice is one of the most important elements if you want to engage people via the right means at the right time. See below for more on differentiating between surveys, focus groups, idea generation campaigns, suggestion boxes, digital tools, and more.

How often will you listen?

For listening to be most effective it needs to be repeated, but preferably continuous. Your strategy should outline which groups you will target, how often, and through which channels.

What do you need to ensure success?

Even though an individual or single team may have ultimate responsibility, you may still need buy-in from senior stakeholders and an allocation of budget or time.

A simple overview can incorporate all these elements.

Scope	Objectives	How	Frequency	Resources
All staff	Increase annual eNPS score by +5	■ Idea management platform & comms ■ Monthly pulse surveys	■ Monthly comms and continuous availability to add new ideas ■ Monthly emails / intranet popup	■ 2 hours per month from Internal Comms ■ 4 hours per month for analysis and feedback ■ $3,000 per month for survey platform
Corporate HQ / hybrid staff	Reduce staff turnover of HQ and hybrid workers by 2% annually	■ In-person Town Hall with CEO / C-Suite to answer all questions posed in prior month ■ Departmental focus groups led by HR	■ Monthly ■ Every six months	■ 2 hours per month from Internal Comms to get feedback and prep ■ 2 hours per month prep and delivery from C-Suite ■ 2 hours per month for recording and analyzing feedback and change ■ 10 hours every six months for HR to deliver sessions and report

Let's break these elements down further.
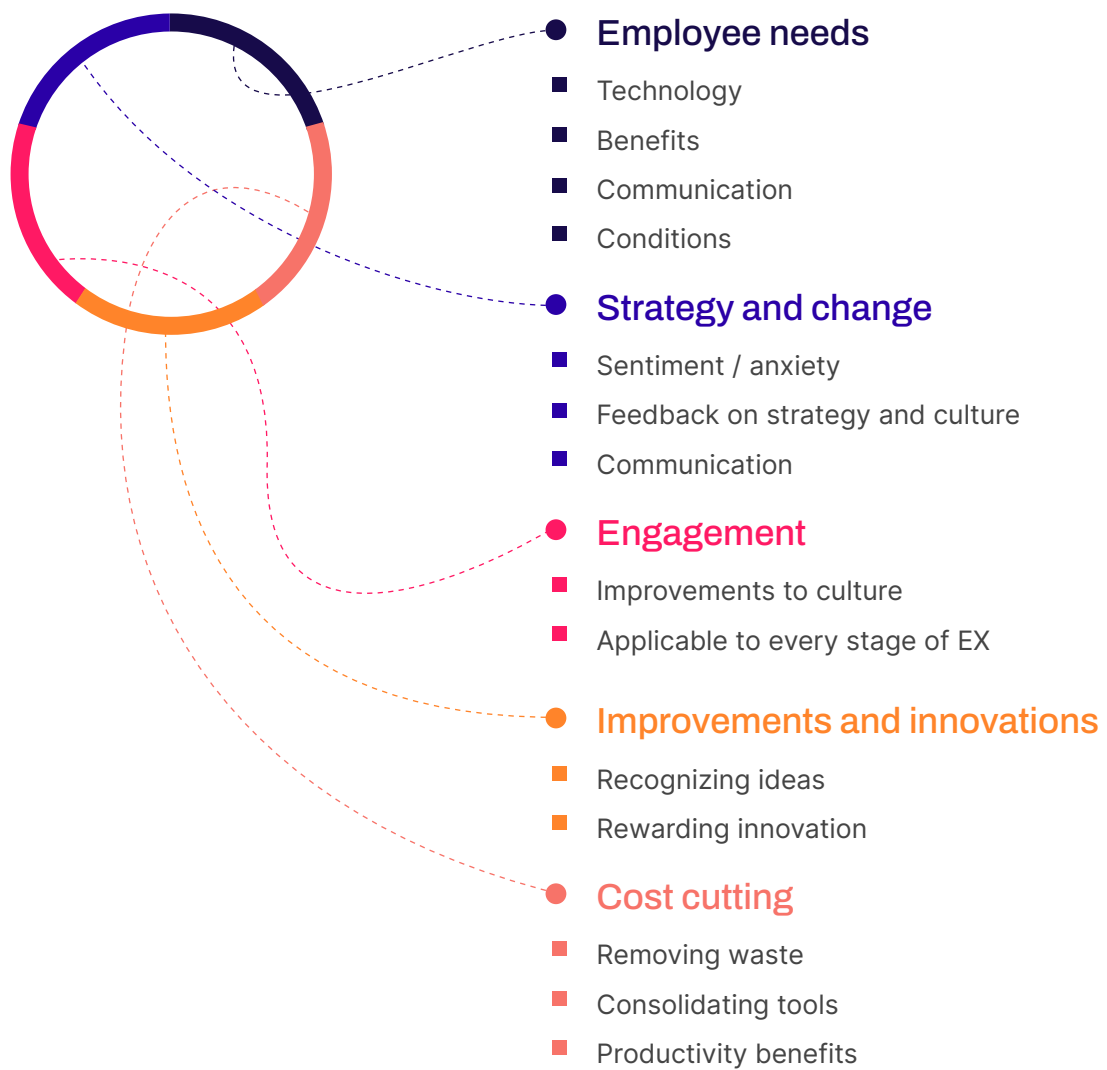
Identifying your purpose and objectives

Why do you want to listen more to your workforce?

If it's a directive from the CHRO or CEO, what problems have they identified that they think employee listening may remedy?

Common areas of focus are:

Before you get involved in setting specific KPIs and SMART framework goals, work with senior stakeholders and departmental leads to understand what your workplace needs.

- **A better understanding of employee needs** – Especially useful for IT and HR, employee needs may change your approach to technology or benefits.

- **Temperature testing on strategy and change** – If the organization is planning significant change, you will need to manage how employees receive and process information. Not only can listening identify areas of improvement, it can boost culture if everyone feels valued.

- **Improving employee engagement** – Many companies have changed the way they work, which has led to problems with maintaining corporate culture and declining engagement. Regular listening creates a sense of inclusion (especially micro-inclusion through ERGs or focus groups) and shows employees that their opinions matter.

- **Identifying innovations** – Listening to employees uncovers areas for improvement and development within an organization. As a result of its innovation program, Nestlé has implemented over 60 projects submitted by employees; their ideas cover everything from eco-friendly deliveries to new confectionary flavors.

- **Cost cutting** – A favorite of CFOs and CEOs, listening to employee ideas can help to streamline digital and physical workplaces so that wasteful processes and technologies are eliminated. By managing employee ideas at scale, the construction firm Balfour Beatty has gained over 11,000 innovative ideas and made millions in cost savings.

Employee needs

- Technology
- Benefits
- Communication
- Conditions

Strategy and change

- Sentiment / anxiety
- Feedback on strategy and culture
- Communication

Engagement

- Improvements to culture
- Applicable to every stage of EX

Improvements and innovations

- Recognizing ideas
- Rewarding innovation

Cost cutting

- Removing waste
- Consolidating tools
- Productivity benefits

Clearly defining your purpose and objectives ensures that your listening efforts are aligned with organizational goals and enables you to measure the impact of initiatives through SMART goals.

DIAGEO

Employee cost saving ideas in action

In 2016, Diageo, the beverages multinational behind the likes of Smirnoff and Guinness, wanted to focus on internal costs. The company launched a campaign — titled 'If it was my money' — asking its 35,000 employees to share ideas to improve productivity.

" By acting like owners, we can all make a difference to fuel growth.
- Diageo

A number of ideas were implemented, such as converting steam from the production process back into power, and the campaign was judged a success.

Establishing a listening channels framework

To facilitate effective employee listening, you need to know how ideas and feedback will be gathered.

In large international organizations, in-person listening is likely to be difficult, so technology can help you scale the process. For companies with just a few hundred staff though, gathering an entire group, or smaller subsets, is easier.

Here are some best practices when deciding which channels to use when connecting with different audiences.

Use multiple channels

Consider confidentiality

Channel choice framework

Set expectations

Focus on integration
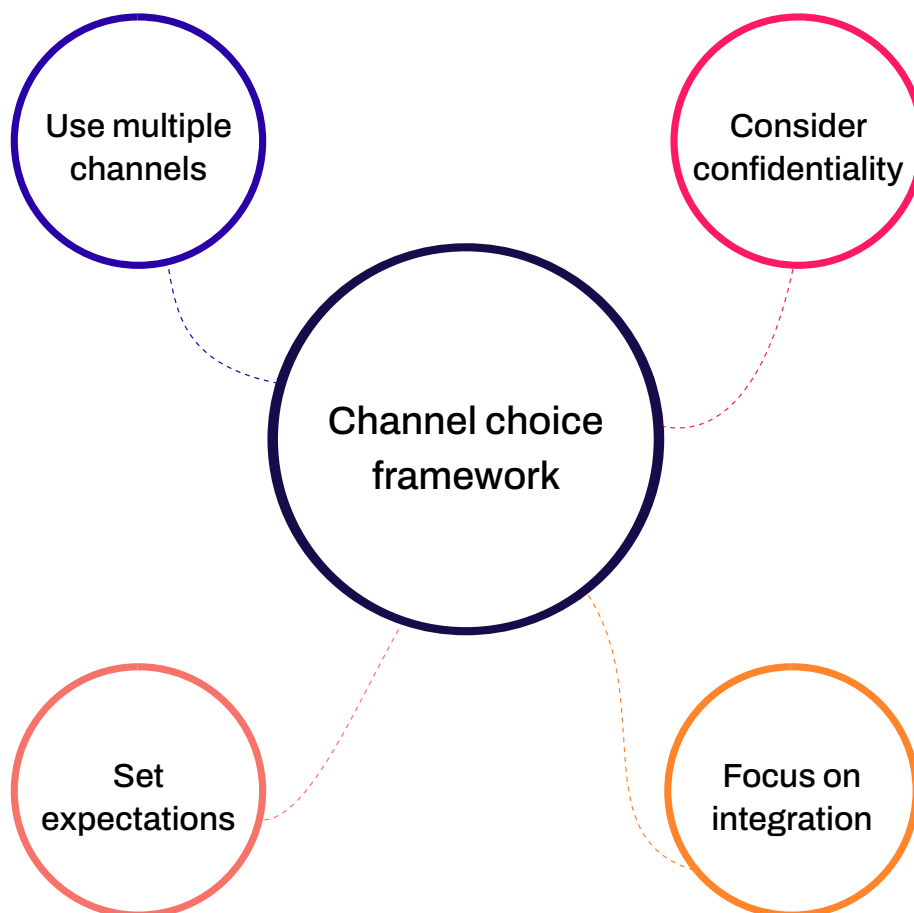
- **A multichannel approach:** Once a year isn't enough, and one channel isn't enough either. Consider the different needs, access, and requirements of workers operating in offices, at home, on location, in your supply chain, and more. If they don't have access to corporate email accounts, people are likely to miss out if your only channel is online surveys delivered via email.

- **Confidentiality guaranteed:** Although some forms of employee listening (such as idea management) will reward people publicly for their contributions, more sensitive feedback must be handled with confidentiality. In many cases, providing the possibility of anonymity should be a feature.

- **Make listening integrated:** As the digital workplace expands, employees face fatigue from the hundreds of different apps and software platforms they use. If your listening strategy is integrated rather than using yet another third-party application, it will encourage people to leave feedback and receive updates in the same places they already work (e.g., an intranet or collaboration platform such as Teams).

- **Set expectations:** Transparency is important if you want people to be engaged with the project for the long term. Commit to the strategy by creating and publishing an intranet area or shareable document setting out guidelines for respectful and constructive communication, what people can expect, how often they can expect it, who they should contact for more information. Creating a comms pack for managers (whether over email, in-person, or through personalized intranet updates for managers only) can create a cascade that increases buy-in.
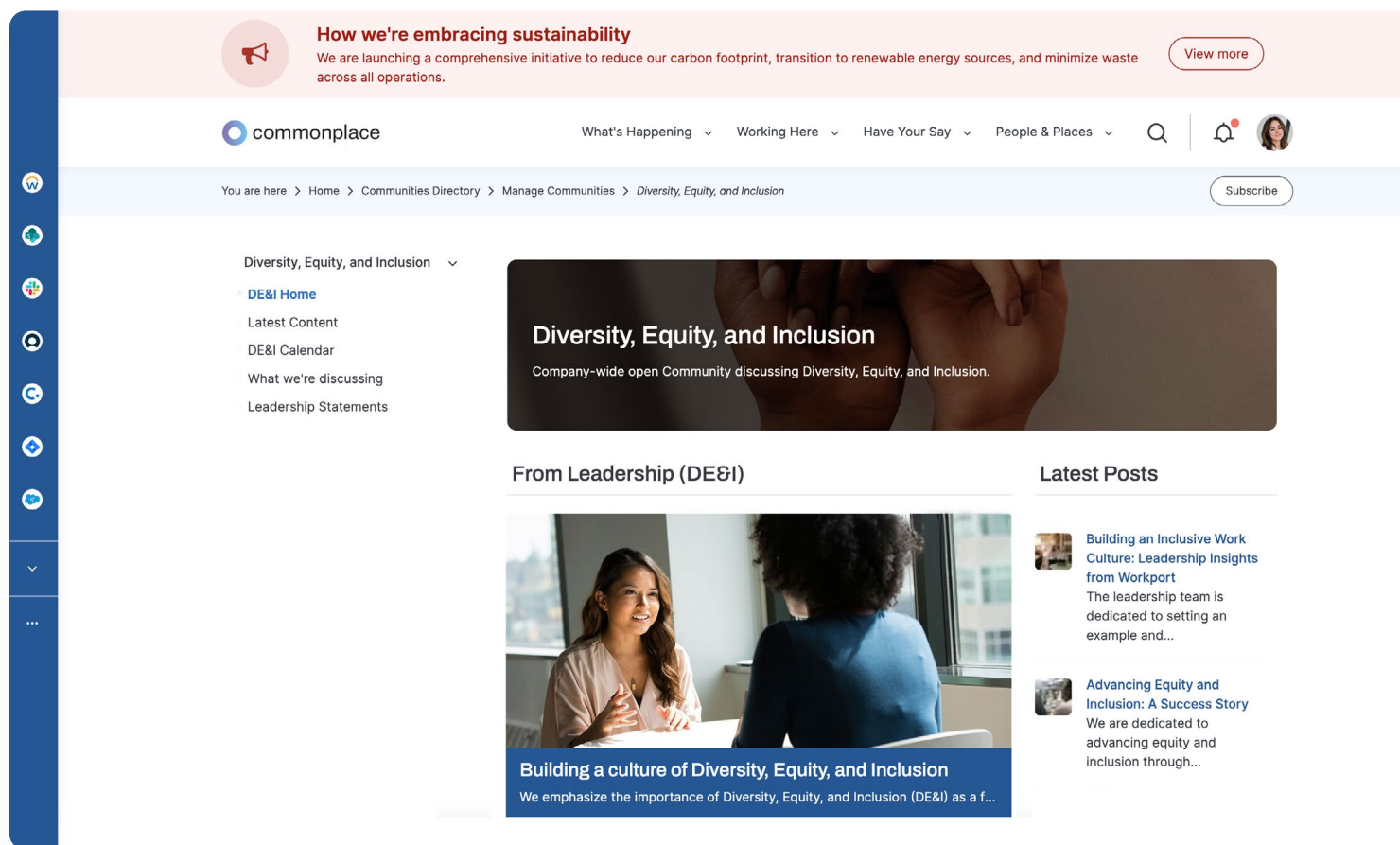
Similar to sites for frontline workers or DE&I, a dedicated employee listening page on your intranet can be a hub for communication, discussion, updates, FAQs, and guidelines.

Channel choice is as much about specific tactics as it is about overall strategy, so it's also important to consider the full range of options available when setting up employee listening initiatives.

Emails, suggestion boxes, meetings, and dedicated communication software are all potential alternatives that should be considered if they are found to be user-friendly and easily accessible for different employee groups.

Channel	Format	Opportunity	Challenge
Web platforms / email (e.g., Mailchimp)	Online questionnaires or surveys	Allows anonymous feedback Scalable in large organizations Easy collection and analysis	May lack nuance if people do not answer open-ended questions Skepticism over confidentiality Additional cost Lack of access for some employee groups
On-location suggestion boxes	Physical surveys or questionnaires Open-ended suggestions Questions for senior leaders	Low / no cost Easy to create Accessible for frontline / on-location workers	Harder to analyze at scale Requires travel and transport Omits remote workers Hard to target very large employee groups
One-to-one meetings and focus groups	Face-to-face or virtual meetings with individuals, teams, or groups	Detailed qualitative information Possible to drill down into specific nuances Non-verbal, non-textual cues can add more detail about sentiment Questions may be prepared in advance	Time-consuming and resource-heavy People may not wish to be recorded, so information may be biased and incomplete Hard to analyze at scale

Channel	Format	Opportunity	Challenge
Social media listening software (e.g., Hootsuite)	Online platforms that automate the monitoring and analysis of social media posts that mention you as an employer / company	Real-world feedback from a broad audience Can include feedback from ex-employees or those who wish to join Good for understanding your Employer Value Proposition (EVP)	Questionable legitimacy and potential to be seen as an invasion of privacy Very partial as many people will not use or post on social media Additional cost for potentially small number of insights
Intranet forums (e.g., Interact)	Open discussion boards accessible through web and mobile	Available in an intranet No additional cost Easy to set up and review Open-ended format allows for nuance and discussion Allows creation of 'domain experts' and employee influencers	Requires time spent on analysis and interpretation Not anonymous Needs to be signposted for infrequent intranet visitors and those who use computers less
ERGs / affinity groups	Group / virtual meetings or written / recorded feedback from active employee resource groups (e.g., DE&I)	A good way to engage groups who may otherwise feel excluded or marginalized Ideal place to ask about specific areas (e.g., progression, inclusion)	Depends on how active such groups are within the organization May not be possible in small businesses

Channel	Format	Opportunity	Challenge
		Employees in these groups may already be active contributors and internal influencers	Requires time and resource to co-ordinate, gather feedback, and analyze
Idea management platform (e.g., Interact, Sideways 6)	An integrated ideas submission and management platform	Integrated easily in the intranet, Teams, and other platforms Possible to create specific campaigns around different initiatives (e.g., how can we improve onboarding?) Easy to manage ideas at scale in a large business with thousands of employees	Requires EX manager to understand what kind of campaigns should be established Relies on the company actively progressing and using ideas Less necessary in very small organizations
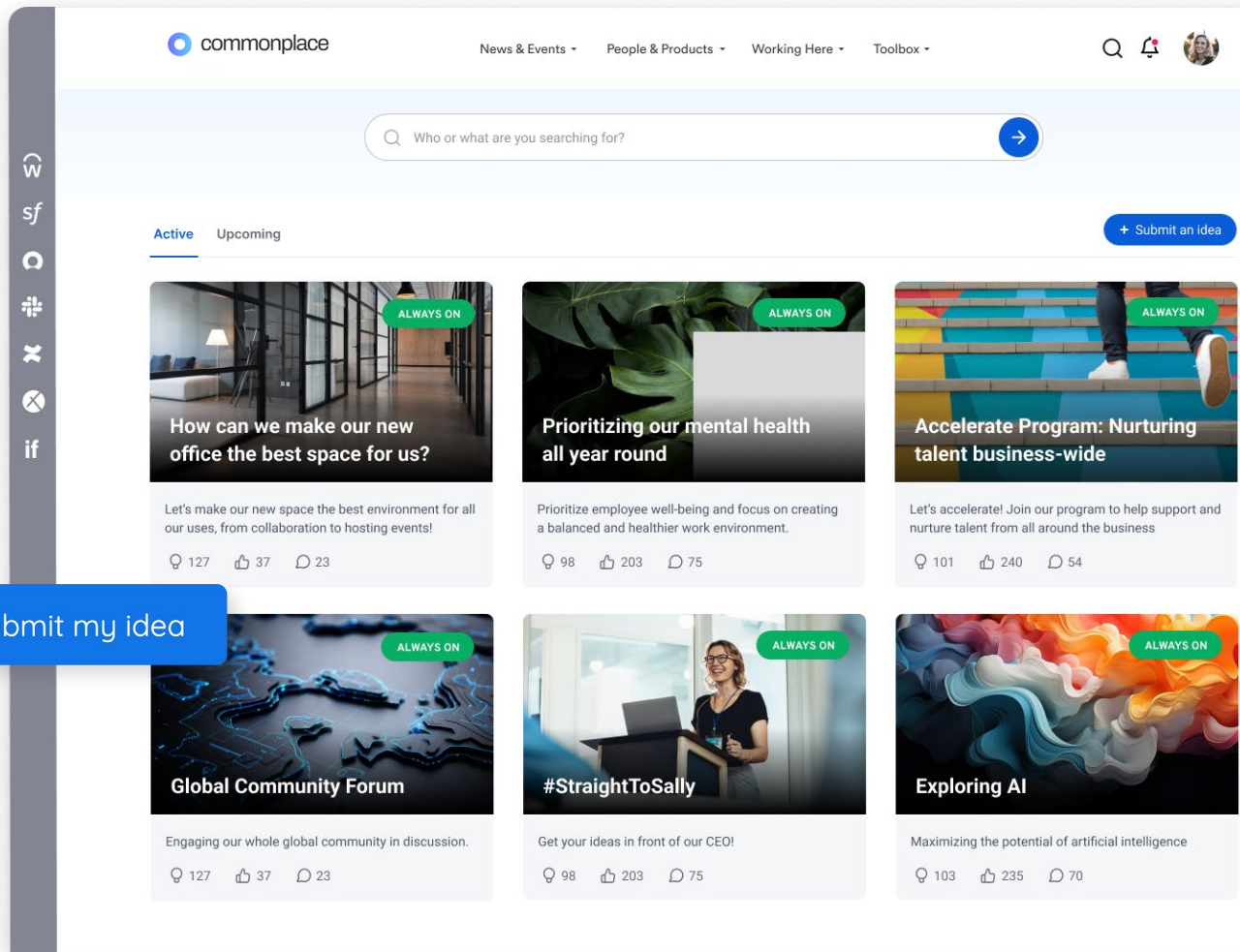
An idea management platform can source and manage employee ideas within the tools they use every day.

Listening along the employee journey

A final thought on establishing a listening strategy.

For employee listening tactics to be effective, they need to reach the right groups along the right channels, in formats with which they are happy to engage.

Another element to consider is where employees are on their journey with an organization. People will use different tools at different stages of employment, and will have varying opinions and attitudes the longer they work for the company.

For this reason, it's important to consider that employee listening can be deployed longitudinally, with different tactics along the way.

LISTENING POINTS THROUGHOUT THE EMPLOYEE JOURNEY

☆ **Recruitment**

What's their first impression?

☑ **Onboarding**

Do they have what they need?

🎗 **Retention**

Is work rewarding and meaningful?

➤ **Development**

Are they progressing?

⚠ **Separation**

How was their EX?

♡ **Advocacy**

Will they become supporters?

Deploying employee listening at every stage gives an opportunity for improvement at every critical point.

2. Tools and technologies

Raising engagement and encouraging employee ideas is easier if you deploy a range of techniques to gather feedback. Consider using some (or all) of these in your listening strategy.

Surveys and questionnaires

Physical surveys, suggestion boxes, and other types of questionnaires are a stalwart of feedback gathering, but their reach is limited in large, dispersed organizations.

Online survey platforms have a wider reach and can complement physical formats and should also be used to raise engagement and awareness.
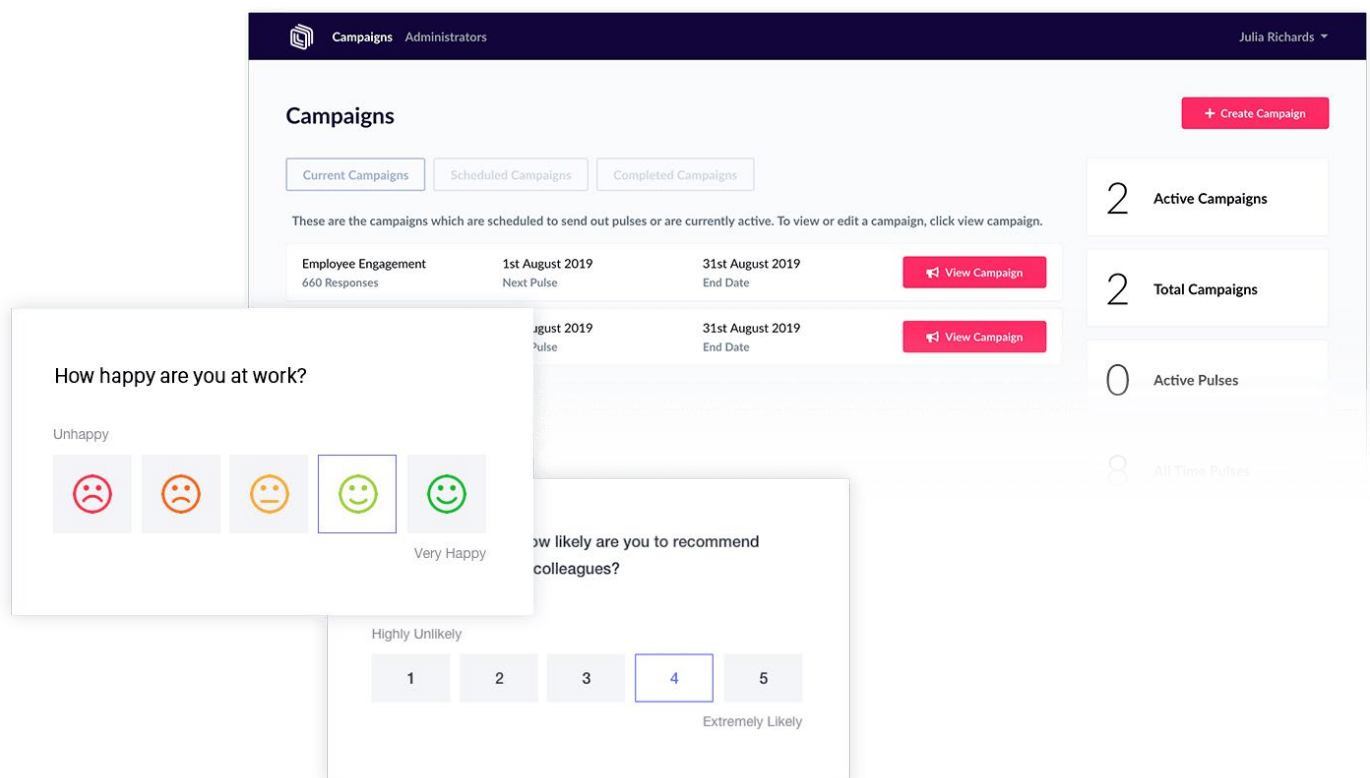
Interact's Pulse tool enables the regular collection of feedback and granular analysis of results.

Some things to consider with surveys:

- **Ask the right questions:** Crafting well-designed questions means making them as clear, concise, and relevant as possible. If the goal of a particular survey is to check whether people want to receive more internal communications, asking additional questions about onboarding will be a distraction. Keeping surveys brief but frequent may be more effective than long and occasional.

- **Use different answer schemas:** Encourage employees to respond by utilizing a mix of closed (e.g., Likert scale) and open-ended questions (free text) to capture a range of insights.

- **Utilize a variety of surveys:** There are several different survey types, all of which can be deployed to meet your objectives. Continuous surveys run in the background and are 'invite-only' to measure onboarding or offboarding, for example; pulse surveys are quick, regular surveys often sent to subsets of staff to measure trends; annual eNPS surveys are a kind of census survey that includes everyone and may focus on a single question or a small number.

- **Use pulse surveys frequently:** Pulse surveys are important for engagement and innovation. They require little effort from employees and can be used to ask about everything from current morale to manager performance. The key is to make them regular and easy to complete.

- **Develop a calendar:** No-one likes to be asked the same question constantly, so it's best practice to approach surveys thinking about cadence and frequency. Running differently themed surveys throughout the year could increase engagement and show that the company values a wider range of issues.

Month	Theme
January	eNPS
February	Internal comms preferences
March	Wellbeing
April	Innovation focus (give your ideas)
May	None
June	DE&I
July	Internal comms preferences
August	Wellbeing
September	Innovation focus (give your ideas)
October	None
November	Year in review
December	None

Surveying employees by themes can also be broken down further into employee subsets (e.g., roles or locations).

Social listening

Social listening comes to us from the world of marketing. Companies use social listening tools such as Hootsuite when they want to monitor public social media conversations about their brand, its competitors, and the shape of the market more broadly.

To see how engaged their customers and prospects are, companies routinely track brand mentions, sentiment, customer feedback, industry trends, and opportunities for improvement or innovation.

It's more difficult to track employee mentions on social media, but that doesn't mean social listening is impossible.

If your intranet offers forums or discussion boards, use them to generate discussions and give employees a place to talk about specific themes or challenges.

Although many of these forums can be focused on questions of cost cutting, productivity, or idea generation, they can also be a social place where dispersed staff connect over shared interests.

Even something as simple a forum for colleagues who are dog owners or who enjoy a specific hobby can give people a place to engage and may lead to the emergence of internal influencers who can help others by answering questions and generating more discussions.
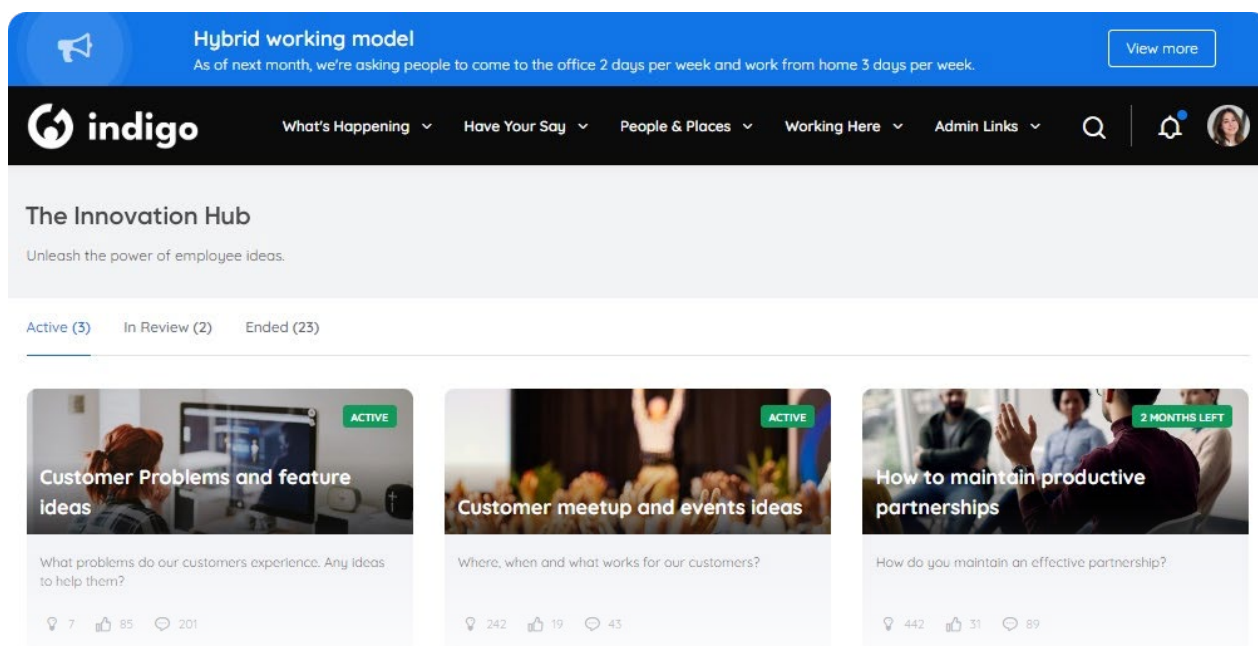
To manage the gathering of feedback at scale, a moderator dashboard enables those leading a listening project to have an aerial overview of the conversations going on across a business. This includes understanding who is contributing and in what formats.

If you discover that timeline posts are your organization's most popular way of spreading ideas, it may be a good idea to focus on encouraging more people to use them through a comms campaign or manager cascade.

Discover individual contributors and frequency through a listening dashboard.

Idea management

Idea management – which means crowdsourcing employee ideas and then managing them at scale through a dedicated platform – not only helps a business find innovative approaches and increase productivity, but also creates a culture of listening that improves employee engagement and employee loyalty.

The problem is, it's not very easy to do it well; it can be challenging to gain and maintain engagement.

To make idea management a successful part of your listening strategy:

- Break up innovation generation into specific campaigns. Request ideas around customers one month and productivity the next.

- Gamify the process by creating leaderboards and rewarding those who submit ideas that are subsequently implemented.

- Program idea management as part of other listening efforts. Pulse surveys, in-person meetings, and idea gathering can all have a place.

- Ask different questions for various groups. Not everyone will deal with customers so they will have less ideas. Give them the opportunity to contribute too.

- Make it integrated into the tools they're already using. If your company uses an intranet or Microsoft Teams, make that the place they can submit ideas so they don't have to look elsewhere.

In-person and virtual meetings

While digital tools are valuable, in-person and virtual interactions also remain crucial.

One-on-one meetings, focus groups, company Town Halls, and working with employee resource groups (ERGs) all provide an opportunity for deeper conversations, public contributions (e.g., "ask the CEO"), and the gathering of qualitative insights.

It can be more difficult to make these meetings impactful, however, because the quality of the questions and answers may come down to the people taking part.

Consider the following when conducting employee gatherings:

- **Send advance communications:** Make sure that people know in advance what is taking place, what is expected of them, what the outcomes will be, and don't forget to include the "What's in it for me?" factor to explain the value of their participation for them too.

- **Create structured discussions:** Prepare structured discussion guides with key topics and questions.

- **Deploy active listening skills:** Practicing active listening during one-on-one meetings and focus groups can help to create a psychologically safe environment that encourages open sharing. These skills include paying attention, being present, empathetic listening, asking open-ended questions, and summarizing what people have said to show you understand.

- **Use professional moderators:** It won't always be necessary or appropriate, but the use of outside experts may help people value the process more highly because it reduces bias and they can see the investment from the company too.

- **Create a hub for discussion:** Others in the organization may want to hear what you've learned so post the conversation on your intranet for continued engagement after the event.

Conclusion

An engaged workplace will drive greater innovation and help a business to realize new opportunities or streamline costs.

Engagement is illusive, and it can be challenging to create a one-size-fits-all approach that raises it across the board.

Employee listening won't work perfectly for all employees and every organization, but when it's deployed well it has the power to promote greater engagement for individuals and to generate new ideas that will drive company performance.

Listening to employees is not a one-time event like an annual survey; when done right, it is continuous, multichannel, and followed up with action and communication.

Publicly communicating outcomes and recognizing individual contributions highlights how people's input influences decisions and shapes the organization.

Ready to upgrade your employee experience?
Talk to our workplace experts today.