

National Norms: A Practical Perspective

by Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D.

HR professionals sometimes inquire whether a 360-degree assessment features national norms.

This is an appropriate question when referring to a rigid survey with a fixed set of measurements that can't be customized. When every person in every organization is administered exactly the same set of items, it's possible to accumulate industry and national averages drawn from many organizations. However, that data may, in the long run, have little meaning within a given organization. In addition, when organizations use customized surveys, with no two alike, national averages — national norms— are technically impossible.

Rigid surveys were popular in the 1980s and early 90s, but today most organizations no longer value the "one-size-fits-all" approach to 360-degree feedback. Instead, they require customized feedback surveys that align with the *culture* and *practices* of their particular workplace. Today's organizations develop the survey items in-house.

The use of customized surveys is an enlightened approach to feedback, and there are many examples. The leadership activities of a Baptist minister are simply not the same as those of a Marine Corps battalion commander. What a movie director does to get the best out of people doesn't involve the same actions as those of a dean of a law school. A sales manager doesn't lead people the same way a project manager of a construction site does. All these people are leaders, and it's important to give them feedback about how they lead; but each setting involves a somewhat different mix of leader behaviors.

While feedback recipients are often interested in how their ratings compare with those of other people, this is not the most meaningful way to make sense of one's scores. The ultimate payoff of 360-degree feedback is improved performance, and this is possible only if an individual focuses on a single area of behavior that needs improvement. Comparing high and low scores is the most effective start point, supplemented by comments and previous feedback scores.

Actually, comparing one's scores to the averages of one's group and one's organization is far more meaningful and revealing than comparisons with national or industry averages, which are based on practices within other organizations and that involve different businesses, strategies, cultures, practices, challenges and technologies.

Placing importance on how one's scores compare with those of other people can be counterproductive. Experience has shown that individuals often lose interest in improving their performance after they discover that their scores are "above average." This predictable outcome defeats the individual's need for continuous improvement and enhanced competitiveness in the career marketplace, and it defeats the desires of coworkers for that person to improve how he or she operates.

20/20 Insight GOLD doesn't use a fixed set of measurements. As a platform for tailored feedback surveys, it permits easy customization, so that an assessment exactly mirrors the behaviors that are important within a particular organization. Therefore, national norms are impossible to collect and are inappropriate to the needs of the organization. If certain surveys are used organization-wide and if a comparison of scores is desired, the 20/20 Insight software can report local averages— both group and organization norms. This may be far more meaningful for the organization and the individuals involved.

About the Author

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