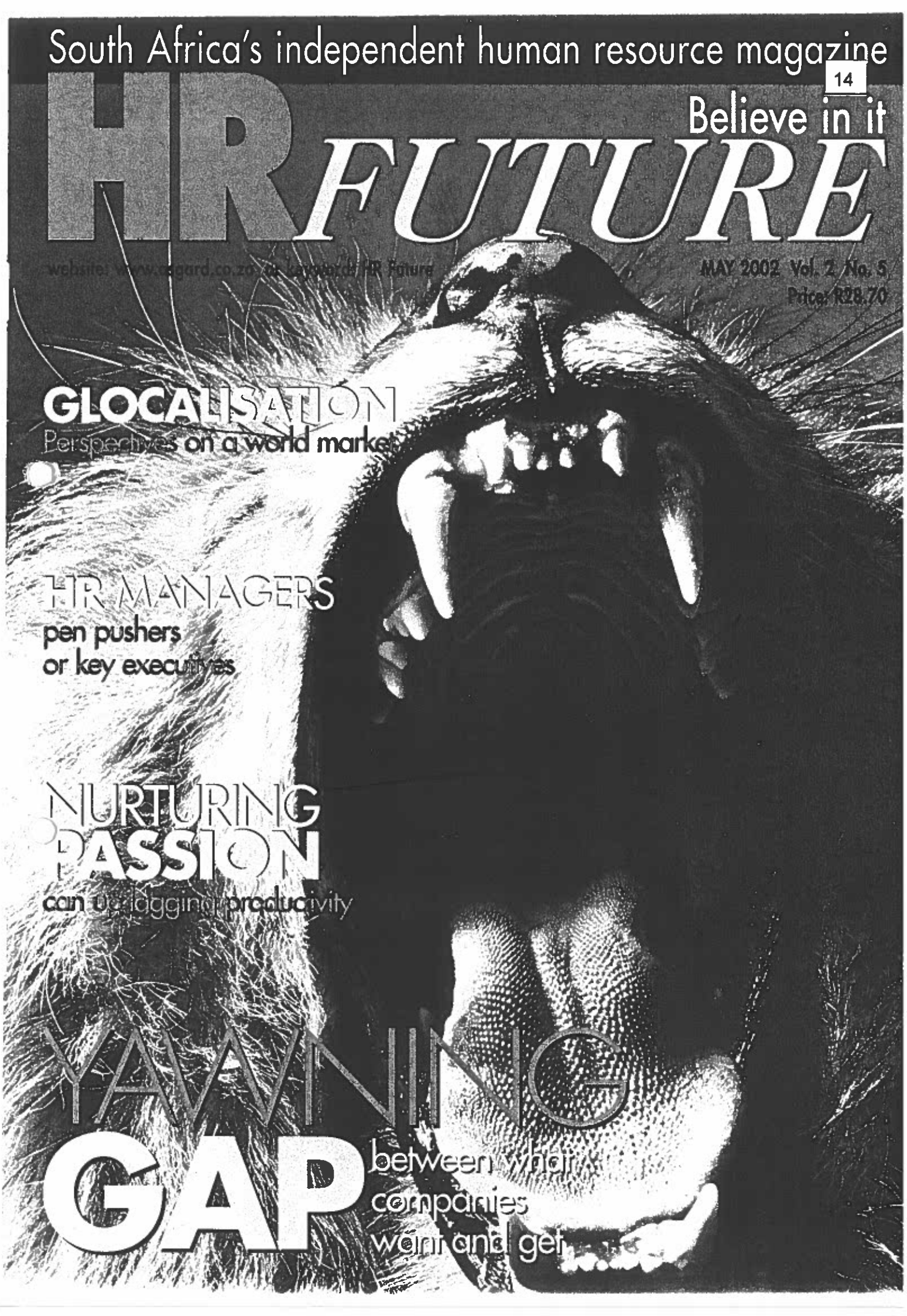
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BY ELLEN MARTINS AND PROF. NICO MARTINS

ORGANISATIONAL SURVEYS

Role of technology in organisational assessments

Changing technology is driving the next generation of organisational surveys. As more and more employees are becoming computer literate and have access to PCs, e-mail/web surveys are increasingly becoming a major alternative to paper and pencil surveys.

ALTHOUGH CHOOSING A METHOD TO ADMINISTER A SURVEY IS NOT BASED SOLELY ON THE AVAILABILITY OF EXISTING TECHNOLOGY, E-MAIL/WEB SURVEYS OFFER POSSIBILITIES THAT FIT IN WITH THE POWERFUL DEVELOPMENTS IN THIS FIELD.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN E-MAIL/WEB SURVEYS

The merging of network mail systems and telecommunications has opened this avenue for information flow between remote locations and has led to the option of conducting surveys via e-mail/web.

One of the latest features of e-mail/web surveys is automatic data entry, which saves time and ensures accuracy. Some factors that need to be considered when considering e-mail/web surveys are:

Confidentiality The availability of data gathered from employees is directly tied to their perception of trust toward the organisation. Employees want to know whether it is safe to answer survey questions truthfully, without fear of retribution or reprisal. In e-mail/web surveys, responses are usually returned via e-mail, which poses concerns about respondents' identity (linking employees' e-mail addresses to their responses). The problem can be minimised by making use of an outside consultant to administer the survey and returning e-mail responses directly to the consultant. Even though current e-mail survey systems are able to remove any resulting footprints from a submitted survey, some employees remain suspicious.

Flexibility The software that is available today allows for more flexibility in terms of the format an organisation can choose to administer the survey electronically. Some formats that are available are text-based, form-based or web-based. The text format is e-mailed either as part of the e-mail message or as an attachment, depending on the length of the questionnaire. Employees would then scroll through the survey to insert their responses and reply to the message.

E-mail surveys These can also pose an organisation's open-ended questions to employees and the information can be easily saved and translated into a format for subsequent analysis.

Time and logistics The popularity of alternative survey methods is due to the quick feedback they offer to changes occurring both inside and outside the corporation. The time it takes to survey employees and analyse the data can be dramatically reduced by making use of e-mail/web surveys. These methods analyse the data in a form that allows for immediate processing of the results.

The downside of making use of e-mail/web surveys are logistical constraints of administering the survey. This is especially true if access to the technology required is not available to everyone or if the supporting infrastructure for the technology does not currently exist in the organisation.

Another important factor to consider is employee familiarity with the technology underlying the electronic survey, for example, knowledge of handling attachments, replying to e-mails and/or knowledge of the Internet.

In designing e-mail surveys, differences in technology need to be considered, particularly differences in electronic mail systems. The duration of the survey development phase will be determined by the sophistication of the organisation's existing technology.

Ease of use Fundamentally successful organisational surveys facilitate communication between people. Therefore, people need to feel comfortable enough with the survey technology that they will communicate their opinions through it.

Taking an e-mail survey The respondent uses the mouse to reach the area in which he or she will record a response. The respondent can scroll back through the questionnaire to review previous responses. Once the survey is complete the respondent simply uses the reply function to return the survey. Clear and detailed instructions/directions for completion and submission which fit the circumstances of the particular survey, need to be provided.

Facilities and cost The main cost of administering e-mail/web surveys is associated with the software necessary to develop and distribute the questionnaire. Any organisation that conducts surveys regularly may consider purchasing a software package and appointing an employee whose main responsibility will be conducting surveys. On the other hand an outside consultant who already has the infrastructure in place and the

Figure 1 of this article is available on our website: www.osgard.co.za Click on this month's cover to view it.

necessary expertise may be used.

THE PROCESS

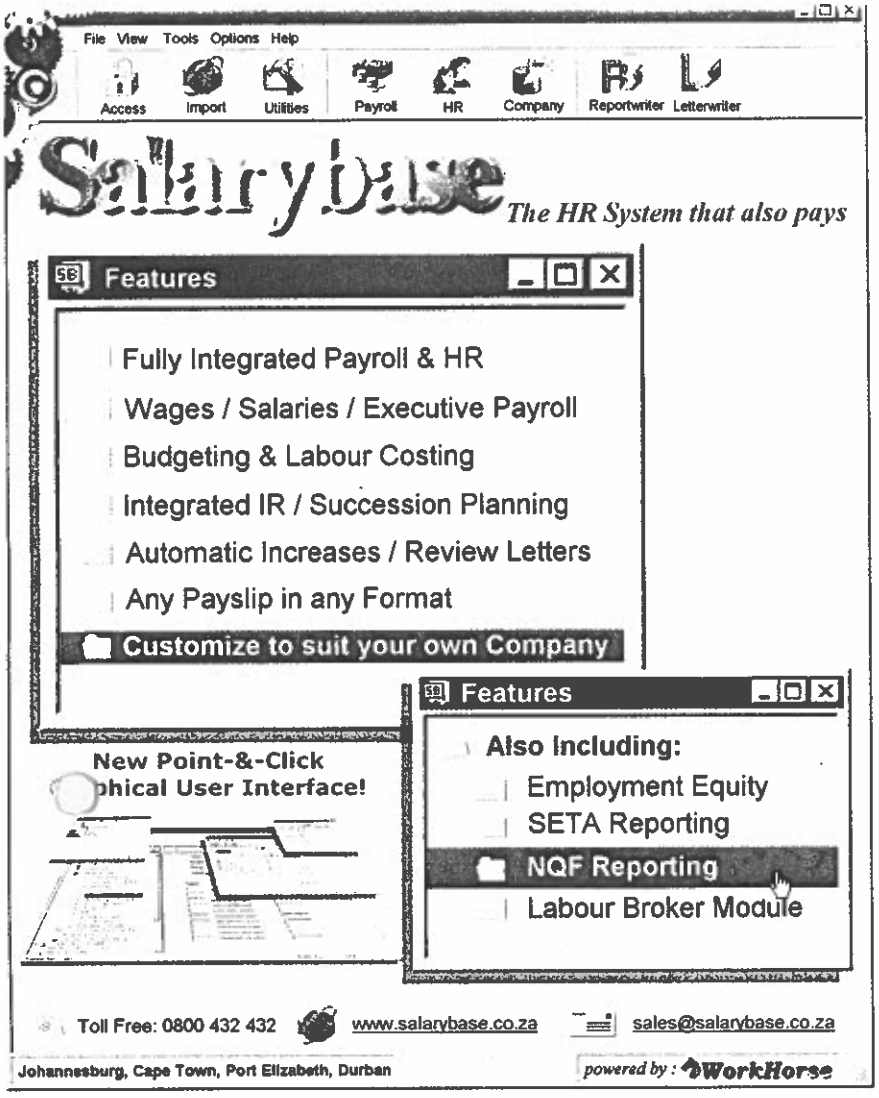
The process of conducting an e-mail/web survey is portrayed in Figure 1.

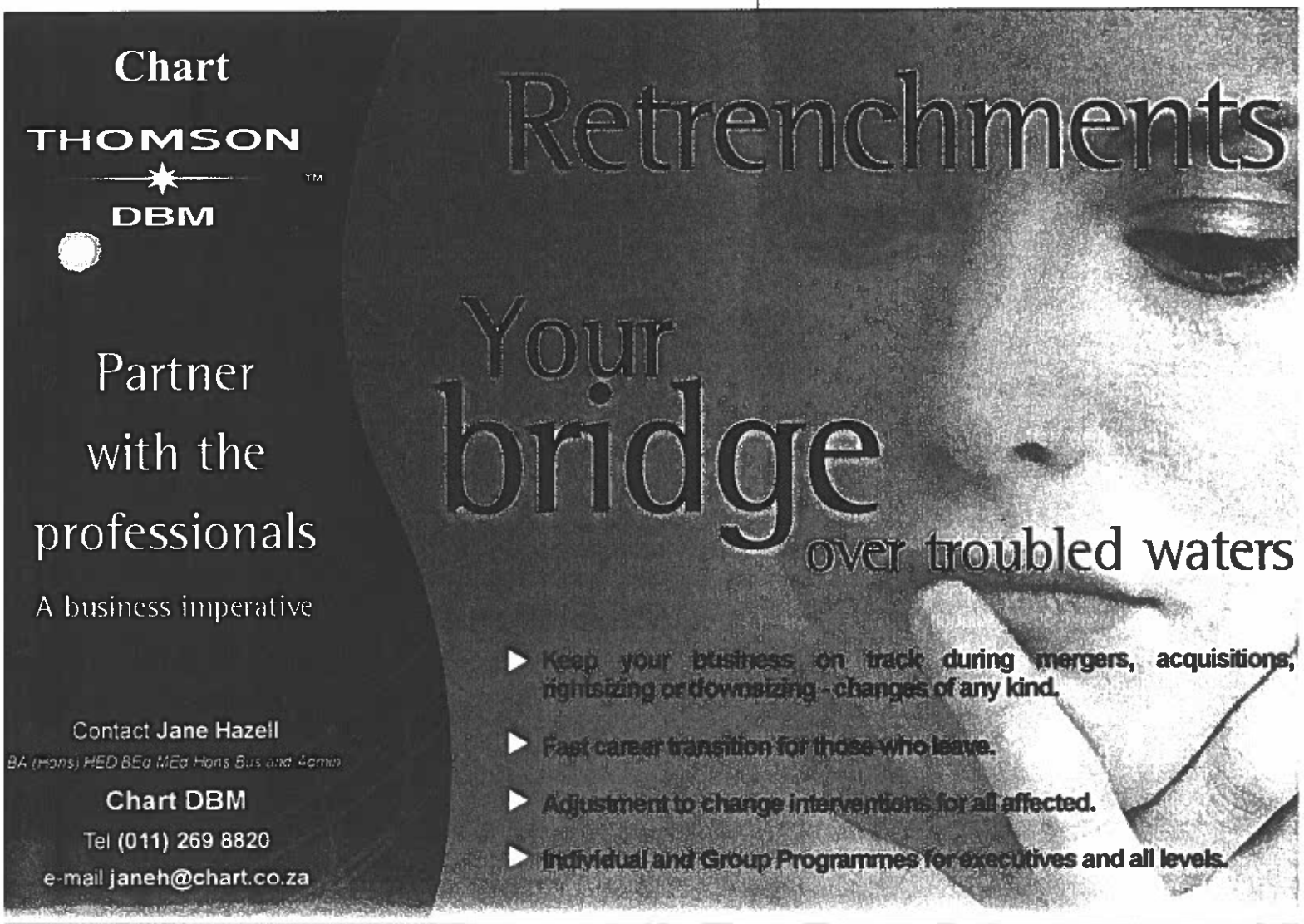
The nine-step process shows that most aspects can be managed effectively by means of an e-mail/web survey system. This reduces time and cost of conducting an organisational survey.

A comparison of the main two types of surveys, that is, paper and pencil (Table 1) and e-mail/web gives an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of each in terms of cost, timeliness, accuracy and administration. Overall it appears as if the e-mail/web option offers the best long-term benefits.

The typical surveys that can be conducted by means of e-mail/web surveys are:

- Customer satisfaction surveys;
- Employee satisfaction surveys;
- Climate/culture surveys; and
- 360° audits.





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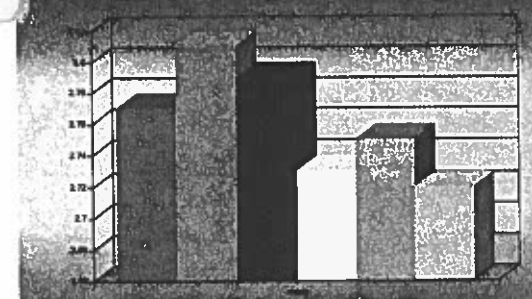

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LESSON LEARNT

A number of companies such as Iscor, Daimler-Chrysler, Deloitte and Touche and SAP(SA) have embarked on e-mail/web surveys in the past two years. The following are some of the important lessons learnt from these surveys:

- first determine the computer capabilities of the organisation;
- involve HR and IT in the planning phase;
- budget enough time for the initial testing and set-up of the survey
- monitor the survey responses daily and adapt instructions if needed; and
- if necessary, combine e-mail/web with paper and pencil and PC assistance.

CONCLUSION

New developments create new opportunities for organisations but also some disadvantages that need to be managed. Overall it appears as if e-mail/web surveys are the future trend and are a cost effective alternative to the traditional paper and pencil surveys.

Ellen Martins is a Management Consultant with Organisational Diagnostics South Africa, and Prof Nico Martins is with the Department of Industrial Psychology, University of South Africa. E-mail: nicellen@iafrica.com.

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TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF SURVEY METHODS

	PAPER AND PENCIL	E-MAIL / WEB
Cost	+ Low overall cost – Data collection cost increase with number of participants – Same overall cost for each survey	– High initial cost to install softwa + Cost effective distribution and receiving of questionnaires + Low cost data collection + Decreasing costs after initial hig cost
Timeliners	– Printing and data capturing time can be significant + or – Time spent on analysis	+ No printing cost, quick data collection + Quick analysis and feedback depends on software used
Accuracy	– Depends on key entry accuracy – No possibility to return incorrect completed questionnaires	+ Read in responses, 100% reliat + Incorrect questionnaires can be returned with new guidelines
Administration	+ Flexible formats and instructions until printed – Rely on postal service or internal mail	+ Flexible formats and instructions + Easy access to all geographic areas + Convenient and comfortable to complete – Logistical constraints of technological infrastructure – Concerns about identity

\+ = Advantage
– = Disadvantage