

# HOW ARE WE DOING? “BEST OF ISPI” APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY MEMBER SURVEY

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The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) Board of Directors undertook a study to uncover the “best of ISPI” to enhance their strategic planning. The approach used Appreciative Inquiry methods, which emphasize discovering “what’s working.” This article describes the study and concludes with some thoughts on how to use this information to enrich member experiences and provide new benefits.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

AS THE 2007 International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) Board of Directors discussed the brand initiative, it seemed that ISPI had completed many studies that provided data based on checklists and predetermined response sets but did not provide free response insight regarding the preferences, good experiences, feelings of appreciation, and comfort (“at home” feeling), or what ISPI members hoped for or foresaw in the future of the professional association. Free response has the advantage of gathering information in the respondent’s own words. Data gathered by checklists or other predesignated options (even with “other” as an option) tend to hint or establish a limited mindset. With free responses, there are extensive opportunities for self-expression. This “Best of ISPI” survey was designed to elicit positive feelings, values, and judgments. Often, surveys are designed to figure out what could be improved upon instead of learning what is going well. The survey results are helpful for planning purposes and a type of internal scan of the association. The ISPI 2007 board authorized that the survey be conducted with Darlene Van Tiem and Jennifer Rosenzweig as co-chairs. Mary Norris Thomas served as research advisor.

The research questions were as follows: What do members view as important aspects of ISPI currently and what do they envision for the future in ISPI?

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### Research Methodology

The research was designed based on the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastava at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). AI is based on asking positive questions designed to draw out positive responses from the target audience. This methodology has been used by the Dalai Lama, UNESCO, British Broadcasting Company, McKinsey, U.S. Navy, Hewlett-Packard, Verizon, and many more not-for-profits and major corporations.

### Timeframe

The entire research process was to occur following the June board meeting and the first draft report was to be available to the ISPI board members and the brand consultants, Brand Taxi, by September 1, 2007. ISPI divided their membership list into four equal parts by selecting member records and grouping each record by the last two digits of the six-digit member record ID. This sorting and grouping determined which ISPI member group would receive a particular question from the four questions. Responses were to be returned by Wednesday, August 15, 2007; however, a few straggled in after the cutoff date. The

response time was short, but the entire timeframe for the project was very limited.

## Survey Committee

Van Tiem and Rosenzweig were the principal investigators. The survey committee was composed of three Carlson Marketing employees (which is an ISPI advocate organization): Rosenzweig, Bonnie Shellnut, and Peggy Bennett. Thomas (ISPI board member) was the research advisor on the committee. Van Tiem (ISPI board member) was coordinator of the survey project. ISPI staff members who supported the effort were Rick Battaglia, April Davis, and Craig Grimm.

The entire membership of ISPI was included in the survey because the membership numbers are small and the organization has a history of a limited response rate. Three thousand eight hundred forty-two surveys were distributed via e-mail, and 380 complete and appropriate responses for analysis were received, with a response rate of 9.89%. This response rate was higher than many other ISPI questionnaires and surveys.

## Survey Questions

Survey questions were developed according to Cooper-riker's work on positive questions, which is a central factor of AI. At the June board meeting, the four questions were approved. The board agreed that each member would receive only one AI question because members were probably not accustomed to the free response format and the additional time needed to craft a response. In addition, asking more than one question would create distraction and could cross-influence responses. The following questions were used:

- Members have sometimes referred to ISPI as their “professional home.” Describe one or two situations when you felt “at home.” Tell us your story . . . what happened? Where were you? What else was going on? Finally, share why the situation was particularly important to you.
- What do you consider to be the *greatest achievement of ISPI*? How did this achievement set ISPI apart from other professional organizations?
- Think back on your ISPI [peak] *experience*; describe a moment when you felt most excited and proud to have been part of ISPI. Tell us your story . . . What was going on? Where were you? Who were you with? Finally, why does this moment stand out for you?
- [Inspire] Imagine it is the year 2013, and you have just learned that ISPI has been selected by a special U.S. Presidential panel as one of the top non-profit professional associations. The winners were all selected for making unprecedented contributions to not just their membership but also the constituency that the mem-

bers support. You have been asked to be part of a team to share a few remarks for national reporters and journalists. What do you tell them are the most important contributions that ISPI has made to its members, the people and organizations its members support, and the world as a whole? As you consider the journey that ISPI takes to get to this moment, what three qualities of ISPI most contribute to the success you imagine?

## DATA ANALYSIS

Rosenzweig and Van Tiem, with advice from Thomas, analyzed the data. Demographic information was placed in a comprehensive table by Grimm. Rosenzweig and Van Tiem analyzed the member responses and determined category descriptors. They collaborated on the individual question-findings pages, summary pages, conclusions, and recommendations.

## Tallying Respondent Ideas Process

Van Tiem and Rosenzweig used a systematic approach to categorize decisions. They worked separately and then discussed and combined ideas. First, the ideas were read and key words underlined. Then, key words were listed and clustered where appropriate. Primary categories represented the clustered key words. Secondary categories represented ideas that supplemented the primary category. Not all respondents used secondary categories or descriptions of the key words. For example, some would write “HPT,” while other respondents might add “systematic” or “unifying methodology,” etc. The primary category would be “HPT” and the secondary category would be “systematic” or “unifying methodology.” Because not all respondents used these secondary descriptors—some used several—the sum of the secondary categories is not necessarily the same as the primary category. The findings pages cover the category and tally information; they list categories in frequency for that question. Summary pages represent categories as tallies for all questions combined. In this manner, the reader can see the category priority for a particular question and the category priority as a total.

## Findings Pages

Each of the four survey questions were placed at the top of its own category page (one findings page per question). Below the survey question were the findings, which contain a category table with categories listed in priority order for that question. Below the category table were text explanations of the main points covered by the respondents. Last, selected transcript responses represented the common thread within the responses or particularly clear statements, those rich in detail, or those vivid or “sparkling.” The intent was to enable readers of this study to visualize possibilities for acting on the member responses.

## Summary Pages

A comprehensive category table tallied the individual question's category table. Summary categories were listed in priority order of the sum of the individual question tables, enabling the researchers to quickly realize the respondent's priorities. The text below the table represented a brief discussion of the common threads within the responses.

## Statistical Analysis

Simple statistics were used, namely, sums (tallies), percentages, mode for demographics, and ordinal priority order tables. Demographic analysis consisted of straightforward quantitative demographic tables that indicate the characteristics of members who responded to each question and the total responses in general.

On the other hand, the member's question responses were analyzed using the methodology of AI analysis (as described in Tallying Respondent Ideas Process above). Information was conveyed in ordinal priority order tables for each survey question and then summarized in a comprehensive table of categories identified on the findings pages.

## Findings

Here are the findings from the survey (see Table 1):

- **HPT methodology** inspires members and is seen by respondents as ISPI's greatest achievement. Most members who filled out the survey do ISD or training work, but they value ISPI's success in moving beyond training. Members use HPT to broaden their workplace practice. HPT is especially important as an admired achievement with ISPI and key to the future.
- **Conferences** seem to be the place offering the most peak experiences, based on connecting with gurus, sharing and networking with conference attendees and speakers, and attending sessions that combine research and practice or that are evidence-based. Conferences are particularly important because members experience the feeling of ISPI as their professional home and have their peak experiences there.
- **ISPI** is key for future success if it can "get its act together," practice what it preaches, and field test ideas on the association. Members are looking for effective

TABLE 1 COMBINED FINDINGS FROM "ACHIEVEMENT, INSPIRE, PEAK EXPERIENCE, AND AT HOME" QUESTIONS					
	TOTALS	AT HOME	ACHIEVEMENT	PEAK EXPERIENCE	INSPIRE
HPT methodology	<b>84</b>		30		54
Conferences	<b>40</b>	13	3	23	1
ISPI	<b>39</b>	6		3	30
Networking and collaboration	<b>38</b>	8	11	4	15
CPT	<b>33</b>	2	16	10	5
Evidence-based, research to practice	<b>29</b>		16		13
Publications	<b>17</b>	3	4	5	5
Chapters	<b>15</b>	9		6	
Gurus accessible and friendly	<b>12</b>	5		7	
Characteristics of members	<b>11</b>	9		2	

business, PR, and marketing plans. Connectivity is one of the key assets of ISPI. This is evident in the transition from programmed instruction to HPT, the development and success of CPT, the collaboration among industry and academia (practitioners and research), high standards for publications and conferences, and networking. ISPI is considered the leader in performance improvement. Respondents applaud ISPI's high standards and international inclusion.

- **Networking and collaboration** help members apply HPT and enhance their professional practice. Networking is particularly connected with conferences and chapter meetings.
- **CPT** is probably ISPI's most valued service. Although about one-third of the respondents have earned CPT, it was mentioned often, and in glowing and heartfelt terms. CPT apparently means a great deal to members who have achieved the designation.
- **Evidence-based, research to practice** are reportedly important issues for members. Members seem to be looking for conference sessions that connect academia to industry and publications that can help them see how new evidence-based ideas apply to the reality of practice. Members appreciate the reliability and leadership of ISPI trends.
- **Publications** were listed in all sets of survey responses. Again, members are looking for the connection between research and practice and sound ideas that work.
- **Chapters** are very strong places in which members reportedly feel at home, especially when they are unable to attend conferences. Chapters are viewed as helpful, with friendly folks who will help members solve professional challenges. Only approximately 33% of the respondents were chapter members.
- **Guru** access plus a friendly and helpful demeanor are highlights of experiences, especially at conferences.
- **Characteristics of members** are reportedly important. ISPI is viewed as a small professional organization with highly intelligent members. Descriptions included courteous, caring, patient, logic minded, generous, helpful, systematic, and systemic thinking.

### International Responses

Forty-seven members responded from 18 countries outside of the U.S., of which Canada was the largest international response, with 14 (see Table 2).

### CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE POTENTIAL

This "Best of ISPI" survey captured the "voice of the customer" (i.e., the member's own thought process and language). The survey intentionally avoided predetermined

responses sets, such as lists of options. The survey sought to avoid putting thoughts into the respondent's thinking. In addition, the survey focused on what is going well, and

**TABLE 2**  
**RESPONSES OUTSIDE OF USA**

Canada	14
Nigeria	7
Australia	5
Germany	2
India	2
Indonesia	2
Japan	2
New Zealand	2
Sweden	2
Belgium	1
Chile	1
Czech Republic	1
Netherlands	1
Paraguay	1
Saudi Arabia	1
South Africa	1
Taiwan	1
Trinidad and Tobago	1
Total	47

sought to highlight success areas. This approach engenders a level of confidence about what members really value and what they hope for in the future. The unusually high response rate provided us with confidence that the ideas represented a good cross-section of ISPI membership.

## Connections

One striking point is members' interest in connections, across the board. Respondents appreciate networking and collaboration with other members, gurus, conference speakers, local chapter members, and local presenters at chapter meetings, which promote connecting, networking, and collaborating, especially at conferences, local chapters, and smaller arenas, which signify caring about members as individuals, such as international conferences, principles and practices, and Fall symposiums. The interest in connections extends beyond relationships with other members to the relationship and connectiveness of ISPI with other disciplines. Respondents have great pride in the inclusiveness of HPT that links OD, Training, Quality, Communications, Employee Involvement, Culture and Change, Staffing, Compensation (Incentives), and many more professional areas. For example, these connections seem to open members' eyes to the differences between training and performance improvement.

In fact, there were very few mentions of Web-based or electronic sharing in either the future or the present. There was little mention of the ISPI Web site and no mention of Webinars or other electronic ISPI opportunities. Electronic and Web-based may be key opportunities in the future, but they did not appear on the members' "wish list" for this survey.

## Advances in HPT

The discipline of HPT provides the ability to change situations for the better and not just talk about it, create positive results, and help the workforce realize their fullest potential. Knowledge of HPT is said to help members accommodate the "big picture" as well as localize HPT's application. As part of this, many respondents expressed the desire to push the envelope and continually reinvent themselves. They spoke of wanting fresh ideas based on the solid foundation that has already been established.

As mentioned previously, 47 ISPI members responded from 18 countries. Although there is no way to connect responses with countries, respondents appreciate international conferences hosted in other countries, such as European conferences. *International*, in the sense of ISPI, normally means members residing outside of the U.S. International members are also a rich source of fresh ideas and applications. Respondents value promoting the value of ISPI to the rest of the world. Because most ISPI members are reportedly looking for connections, effort

needs to be placed on understanding the application of international ideas. In addition, it is important that U.S.-residing members make the same connection for international members. Actually, the connections may be noticeable but might be called out until all ISPI members see the global and international connections.

This freshness carries over to publications, such as *Performance Improvement* journal, *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, and *PerformanceXpress*. Current members are reportedly looking for future trends and less about refinements of already refined ideas. Of course, there are many new members all the time who are seeking to learn about the refined practical ideas.

## CPT and Credentialing

Although the responses from CPT recipients were limited, their stories were poignant. Stories about when they earned the designation were full of exhilaration and joy. Members appreciate the rigor and caution that ISPI should maintain that rigor. There was no hint of unfairness, concern about rigor, or that the credential is too difficult.

As part of earning their certification, respondents talked about workplace recognition and respect from co-workers. They felt that CPT gave them increased credibility and enhanced their ability to create change in the workplace.

## ISPI

Respondents view ISPI as a positive force, a valuable resource, and important, and they value the credibility that ISPI has established. Respondents expect thoughtful ideas based on evidence, especially connecting research to practice. Winning awards and award recognition were also said to be valuable.

Resources, such as publications and learning events, are considered high caliber and readily available. Articles and resources already on the ISPI database are considered "golden" assets. ISPI provides a rich and expanding array of resources and tools.

## Gurus and Senior Leadership

Respondents report a great deal of respect for gurus (senior ISPI leaders and experts in the field). Respondents want to have dialogue, conversation, and friendly encounters with gurus. Respondents appreciate senior, experienced professionals and academics who willingly help and befriend others in the form of mentoring, informal coaching, and dialogue.

However, they also express the desire to bring in fresh ideas and move beyond the visions of senior leadership. They are challenging ISPI leaders (board) and ISPI staff to use fresh, innovative, creative thinking. There is tension between appreciating the foundations of ISPI and the need to move more into the future. Some respondents

notice a weakening of ISPI and expressed concern; some were actually pleading.

## Chapters

Although chapter members were a smaller group of respondents, their appreciation of chapters was heartfelt. Chapters are considered ways to enter the field, to find out the basics about HPT, and the field in general. Local members offer support in the beginning and reduce confusion about performance improvement. Meeting presenters are often local experts helping local members network with the wealth of resources readily available. Chapters are also a source of support with workplace challenges. Members provide informal ideas and share experiences and best practices. Clearly, chapters are the grassroots of ISPI. Chapters are also growth opportunities for leadership and professional development.

## Evidence-Based, Research to Practice

For most respondents, this is the hallmark of ISPI. Experts are not just showmen or people with energy, charisma, and an ability to tell stories. ISPI experts and gurus are seen as knowledgeable, referencing research and evidence. They are well-read, publish and speak often, and they are admired. Members believe that the ideas of ISPI experts and gurus are reliable and valid; the ideas are to be trusted. CPT standards and the credentialing process only confirm that HPT works and is well-founded. Research to practice will lead to and continue on the tradition of speaking and writing with authority.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Leverage the Concept of Connection

ISPI represents *connections* on many levels. It's about building relationships and connecting people, but as a practice it's also about connecting methods to create more powerful solutions for organizations. Connections also show up when you see that ISPI attracts both academics and practitioners (which is unusual for an association that usually attracts one group or the other). ISPI can take full advantage of this by using connections as part of their strategic point of view. This, in turn, can drive important decisions and actions. For example, how can the conference serve to connect people more deliberately? How can ISPI market itself so that people see the power of connections in business growth? Connections can lead ISPI down a very exciting path.

### Encourage and Emphasize New and Innovative Thinking

**Conferences.** Members are reportedly looking for *fresh ideas*. One opportunity is to solicit conference sessions

that highlight new ideas. On the proposal, there could be a section requiring an explanation as to why this is a new, fresh idea. This would encourage applicants to realize the importance of advancing the profession. This would also be a way to nurture new ideas.

**Funded Research.** Members speak with pride about the credibility of the work. Why not encourage this by funding an annual research project? ISPI can send out a call for proposals and establish parameters for acceptance. Advocates could sponsor and be a part of the judging of research to practice projects including projects conducted in their own organizations, and not just with clients. As an example, ISPI could use connections as a theme and request that proposals come jointly from academics and practitioners. The resulting research insights can be a source for further promotion by ISPI as well as a new resource for members.

**Evidence-Based Thinking.** One way to foster evidence-based thinking is to continue to sponsor and enhance research. Solicit proposals and present sponsored projects that add fresh ideas and credible applications of advancing ideas. Conferences can showcase research and research applications. Actually in many professions, there are associations for academics and researchers and other associations for practitioners. Few organizations have reached this mutual respect between academia and industry. This balance should encourage business and industry partnerships.

### Continue to Promote CPT

**Testimonials.** The quotes we received, though outstanding, couldn't be used for other promotional material, because permission was not requested. However, it would be easy to acquire new quotes by sending an appreciative inquiry survey to CPTers. These quotes could become a library from which to use in advertising, conference signage, etc.

**Press Releases.** As members receive CPT designation, ISPI could promote their accomplishment by sending out a press release to their local paper. A copy could go to the senior management of the individual's place of business. A standard announcement could easily be customized using mail merge and then sent out on behalf of the new CPTs. Local newspapers may be reluctant to publish articles submitted by ISPI members. However, PR releases sent by the professional association would seem more credible and reliable. Both ISPI and the member would benefit from this strategy.

**Advocates.** Although not mentioned in the survey responses, advocates could promote workplace recognition. There could be an advocates track or mini-track at conferences. Advocates could showcase examples of HPT in practice. They could also solicit and sponsor (as an advocates group) the application of research to practice within their own organizations.

## Market HPT as a Manager's Toolkit

HPT is a resource for consultants, but it is also a resource for line management. This broader approach opens up the possibility of marketing HPT to management associations or forums dedicated to leadership. This could bring in greater membership and add credibility to ISPI's membership offer.

## Collaboration With Other Fields and Associations

Spotlighting members who collaborate with professionals from other fields would promote awareness in organizations. Conference sessions on cross-discipline partnerships will make ISPI members aware of the advantages of accomplishing results comprehensively rather than as single issues. This will also provide fresh ideas and promote recognition from other fields. Publishing in other fields and encouraging experts in other fields to publish in ISPI publications will advance collaboration. Cross-discipline publications should include clear linkages between the other discipline and HPT.

## Encourage Greater Participation for New Members

People told stories of how exciting it was to meet gurus and engage in dialogue and relationship building. This made

them feel welcome and encouraged them to deepen their commitment. Rather than leave this to chance, ISPI could host a special lunch where conference attendees could spend a lunch with an expert. This idea may have been tried in San Francisco, but there may not have been sufficient structure and organization to make it a real success.

## Build the Strength of the Chapters

Greater emphasis should be placed on chapters with clear milestones and measures of success. Strong leadership needs to be associated with chapters, and the board needs to pay considerably more attention to the linkage between the chapters and the international association. Perhaps chapter successes could be a regular column in *PerformanceXpress*. Award-winning chapter leaders could offer ways to impact faltering chapters. These improvements cannot be viewed as increasing local members' workload. 🏔️

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