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**THE NUMBERS GUY**

By CARL BIALIK



## When Considering Surveys On Business, Follow the Money

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They're the two dirty words of market research: "sponsored by."

If you spot those words on a news release or article about a business survey, beware. They often indicate that some company or industry group has paid for the research. Someone is likely trying to sell something, and that means the results should be greeted with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Businesses spend a lot of money, hence many sponsored studies examine the modern office worker. They tend to paint a picture of an unproductive workspace filled with inefficiencies screaming out for a product, which just happens to be sold by the study's sponsor.

### ABOUT THIS COLUMN



**The Numbers Guy** examines numbers and statistics in the news, business, politics and health. Some numbers are flat-out wrong, misleading or biased. Others are valid and useful, helping us to make informed decisions. As the Numbers Guy, I will try to sort through which numbers to trust, question or discard altogether. And I'd like to hear from you at [numbersguy@wsj.com](mailto:numbersguy@wsj.com). I'll post and respond to your letters. WSJ.com subscribers can [sign up](#) to receive e-mail when new columns are published (nonsubscribers [click here](#) to sign up), and you can read more columns at [WSJ.com/NumbersGuy](http://WSJ.com/NumbersGuy).

In research released in the past couple of weeks, we've learned from an office-products supplier that 51% of workers world-wide say there is a link between their organizational skills and job performance; from an Internet-security firm that half of U.S. companies don't have a policy on the use of instant-message software, even though it poses a security risk; and

from a corporate-travel company that a third of business travelers want the ability to change their flight itineraries from mobile devices.

I took a closer look at a few of the recent studies, and found that they aren't all created equal. Some appear to be done responsibly, while others are little more than advertisements. But all sponsored studies start out with a credibility debt because of the funding source, and most don't fully pay off that debt.



As with all faulty numbers that see the light of day, the press plays a role. While many sponsored studies spawn no articles or are covered negatively, others receive undeserved attention -- at least enough to spur companies to keep funding more studies. (For more on the problems with sponsored research, see "Tainted Truth," by the Wall Street Journal's Cynthia Crossen, which is on my [reading list](#), updated this week.)

The worst example of commissioned research I took a look at came from Microsoft Corp. Last week, the Redmond, Wash., company's hardware division reported that "two out of three office workers spend at least six hours a day using a computer, and nearly 25% said they spend eight hours a day at the computer." The report went on: "when asked to rate a selection of mice and keyboard manufacturers, Microsoft was the company respondents most associated with reliable, high-quality hardware peripherals."

Among the problems: the company that conducted the survey for Microsoft, InsightExpress, initially screened respondents to ask if they spent at least four hours a day at the computer. It's thus not surprising, nor particularly informative, that two-thirds of those who said yes also spend more than six hours a day at the computer. As for Microsoft being named most often, the other choices weren't household names: Kensington, Logitech and Belken. Had the question been flipped to ask which company was least associated with reliable, high-quality hardware peripherals, Microsoft might well have won that one, too.

Also, InsightExpress surveyed just over 200 people, a small sample. And the company agreed to keep the detailed survey methods and results private, allowing Microsoft to pick which results to publicize. (In this case, in response to my queries, Microsoft sent me the full survey results. After reviewing the full report, it doesn't appear that Microsoft quoted numbers out of context, but there were some odd or loaded questions -- not mentioned in the press release -- indicative of the survey's biases. One question asked workers which piece of office equipment would most boost morale: a "foot rest," a "desk lamp," a "headset for your phone" or "comfortable mice and keyboards with state-of-the-art features and functionality." Guess which accessory won in a landslide?)

"They pay for it, and therefore they own the results," InsightExpress spokeswoman Sandy Kraft said, in explaining why the company doesn't require clients to release full results. She added that the company reviews its clients' press releases for accuracy.

The second paragraph of the resulting [press release](#) from Microsoft reads like an ad: "With employees spending more time in front of the computer screen -- more hours in fact than many of us spend sleeping -- the quality and comfort of mice and keyboards takes on critical importance. That's why Microsoft Hardware is developing sophisticated and reliable products that help keep workers productive and comfortable day after day."

Microsoft says that the four-hour cutoff is a standard one in defining office workers. In an e-mail, Matt Barlow, worldwide director of marketing and business development for Microsoft's hardware group, said that contracting with a third party "ensures unbiased results. Also, "when publishing our findings, we are clear that the surveys have been sponsored by Microsoft Hardware." And readers should regard the surveys accordingly.

A survey [released by Cendant Corp.](#), conducted by Harris Interactive to measure business travelers' attitudes, was one of the better surveys I reviewed. The poll answered by 2,134 adults found, among other things, that 40% of those who identified themselves as business travelers said the most difficult thing to manage on trips was knowing where to go after arriving at a destination, and finding a good place to eat.

That is noteworthy because travelers are asking for a service that Cendant (parent company of Orbitz) doesn't yet offer. Many commissioned studies only report results that validate companies' existing products. Dean Sivley, chief product and marketing officer for Cendant's business-travel unit, says Cendant uses the studies to make product decisions and to bolster the unit's image. "It shows thought leadership, in terms of us caring about what travelers are doing," he says. Cendant declined to say what it paid for the survey, but Harris said this type of survey typically runs \$1,000 to \$1,500 per question. Cendant asked seven questions.

Harris, which also conducts polls for the Online Journal, also used safeguards to ensure better results. For example, Harris mixed Cendant's questions into a larger survey. That helps mitigate a problem with many commissioned studies, in which respondents may be influenced by a series of questions on a single topic to overstate that topic's importance to them.

But there are some caveats. For one thing, the response rate was only 8%, raising questions about whether the respondents were a representative sample. More troubling, Cendant has the right not to release any results if they aren't to its liking. (Harris does release full results if the client publicizes some of them, "so they cannot cherry-pick the results," says Harris Interactive spokeswoman Kelly Gullo.)

Another respectable study came from office-supplier Esselte, which surveyed office managers about the importance of their employees' organizational skills. The company contracted with outside research firms and surveyed about 500 office managers in each of five countries. (The report was [picked up](#) by the Indianapolis Star, which didn't note that Esselte has an interest in office managers worrying about organization. The company's DYMO unit makes label printers.)

The company was open about its motivations in a PowerPoint presentation it sent me on the survey, stating that "the Esselte Public Relations Department was interested in conducting a global study among office managers that would generate newsworthy findings to be used in public relations efforts."

Chris Curran, spokesman for Esselte, told me, "If we can show consumers and our customers that we're the experts in the office-products field, we've got a value-added over our competitors."

Internet-security company SurfControl PLC took a different tack in some recent research. Rather than commission a study, SurfControl surveyed 7,593 of its own customers about policies regarding employees' instant-messaging. That means the sample isn't representative of U.S. companies, yet the press release heralding the results [asserted](#), "Half of companies have no IM policies despite numerous enterprise security risks." SurfControl, of course, sells technology that claims to help companies manage employees' use of various software, including IM.