



How to get feedback from departing employees

Description

Exit interviews provide a unique source of candid and revealing information

By **Angela Civitella**

Do you want to know what is going on in your organization? Then talk to people who are leaving.

Departing employees may leave for very good reasons and learning what these are can help you improve your company's performance. All you need to do is find out what these reasons are!

The information collected in an exit interview can give you a unique perspective on how satisfied your people are, as well as on the performance of your organization. People tend to be brutally honest about their experiences in an exit interview – they no longer have to please their bosses and they have little to fear by being honest. Because of this, the feedback you get from exit interviews can be very useful for identifying problems with operations, performance and staff retention.

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These exit interviews may reveal a common theme. You can then focus on this and turn it into a catalyst for change. Perhaps your salary and benefits package is not generous enough? Maybe your promotional opportunities are too limited? Or perhaps you might hear consistent complaints about a certain manager and decide to investigate the issue yourself. If you aren't conducting exit interviews you're missing out on some great information!

Essentially, exit interviews do two things. Firstly, they reveal opportunities for improvement. Secondly, they encourage people to leave on a positive note. An exit interview is your last chance to say, "We value you and your opinion." This may be enough to leave a positive impression, no matter what the real reason for leaving.



Conducting the interview

There are several factors to consider when deciding how to conduct exit interviews in your organization. These include:

Who should conduct the interview?

The most common choice is to have an internal HR person do it. They should both understand the dynamics of your organization and know the people involved. This means that he or she can dig deeper into issues and ask more pointed questions. The interviewee is more likely to reveal problems to an impartial HR representative than to his or her manager. Indeed, the manager might well be at the root of the problem and, at the same time, might be needed as a future referee. Other potential interviewers include a neutral manager or a mentor the person trusts.

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Some organizations choose to outsource exit interviews to protect confidentiality. The interviewing body aggregates information, so comments do remain anonymous. Although the added cost is a potential deterrent, on the plus side you should be guaranteed an experienced interviewer who knows how to gather data effectively. Also, the departing employee is very likely to be cooperative and honest.

Whoever conducts the interview, they must be trained in active listening and be empathic. The exit interview may become emotional and the interviewer needs to know how to let the person vent their frustrations and leave them feeling listened to and understood.

What questions should be asked?

Here are some examples that you or the person interviewing on your behalf could include:

- Why are you leaving?
- Have you secured a new job?
- Did you seek out the new opportunity or were you headhunted?
- When did you decide to leave and/or start looking for a new job?
- What do you feel is done well in your department?
- What could we be doing better in your department?
- What barriers exist that make it hard to get your job done?
- What is your opinion on the workload and work allocation?
- What is your opinion on the bureaucracy within your department and the organization as a whole?
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What problems exist that we might not know about?

- What could the business as a whole be doing better?
- What's your opinion of our compensation and benefits package?

Don't ask questions you don't want answered. By asking a question you indicate that you intend to make changes if the answer suggests they are necessary. When people give feedback and nothing is done it can damage your credibility. Do not forget that the departing employee will almost certainly stay in touch with someone in your organization and is likely to be aware of whether any action is taken!

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You'll note that some of these questions use the word "could" rather than "should". "Should" implies it is a preferred choice whereas "could" indicates an alternative. Just because the soon-to-be former employee thinks there is a better way of doing things doesn't mean there is!

Will the interview be confidential?

This is a difficult issue especially in small companies or those with low staff turnover where the source of any resulting information is going to be easy to identify. The best strategy here is to be as honest and upfront as possible. If you can't guarantee anonymity then don't. You can say that you will do your best to protect the person's identity but offering a firm guarantee may not be realistic.

It's also important to tell people that if they reveal information that demands further investigation, like serious breaches of company policy or accusations of fraud or discrimination, it will most certainly be shared with the proper authorities.

Whatever you do, you don't want to break promises, because you can be sure any breach will get back to your remaining workers, potentially damaging their trust in you.

Is the interview mandatory?

No. Exit interviews should be voluntary although whether you can legally require someone to attend one is an issue that continues to be debated. But many organizations make it clear to staff that they will expect to conduct one when someone resigns. When the interview is expected, it becomes part of the culture and there is less apprehension about the process. A good strategy to use is to combine the interview with other final activities, like handing in keys or signing off forms.

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The opportunity to attend an exit interview should be extended to anyone leaving the organization. The process needs to be fair and impartial. You don't want to be seen to be picking and choosing the people you interview. Instances of termination and lay-off may, of course, require a different approach.

Tips for getting the most from your exit interviews

As you can see there are several factors to consider when putting together an exit interview program. Here are



some more tips for making the most of the process:

Listen actively

- Focus on listening. Don't debate with or confront the person. Let him or her talk and analyze the information later.
- If the person chooses to vent their feelings, listen carefully and determine which are credible issues and which are not.
- Don't get into a detailed discussion about how to solve a problem. Focus more on understanding the general situation, so you can follow-up.
- Thank the person for the interview and do what you can to leave them feeling good about the organization.

Keep a record

- Ask if you can record the interview. This helps recall later.
- Make notes and get on record why the person is leaving. A member of staff may allege misconduct later on. A written record can show that you were not aware of the issue at the time of the person's departure.

Collate and analyze

- Evaluate the information and look for patterns. If you hear consistently good comments about a manager, consider a development program and succession plan for him or her. Equally, if you get consistently poor feedback about someone, follow up with their manager and get to the root of the problem. Other issues that are often raised include workload, compensation, recognition, and respect.
- Be open to information but remain skeptical. The departing employee may have had a grudge or ulterior motive.

Rather than simply using exit interviews with departing employees, consider "retention interviews" with longer-term employees to figure out why they stay. You can then use these as selling points with potential new hires.

Key points

Exit interviews are one of the best ways to find out why people are leaving your organization and to work out how to improve the workplace for those who remain.

They can provide great insights into staff expectations and they often show you patterns within your business that you can work with to make significant positive changes. What's more, exit interviews can also highlight areas of deterioration within your organization that you might not otherwise become aware of until it is too late.

Ultimately, the people who know your organization best are the ones who work there. Taking the opportunity to talk with people as they leave your company provides a unique source of candid and revealing information.

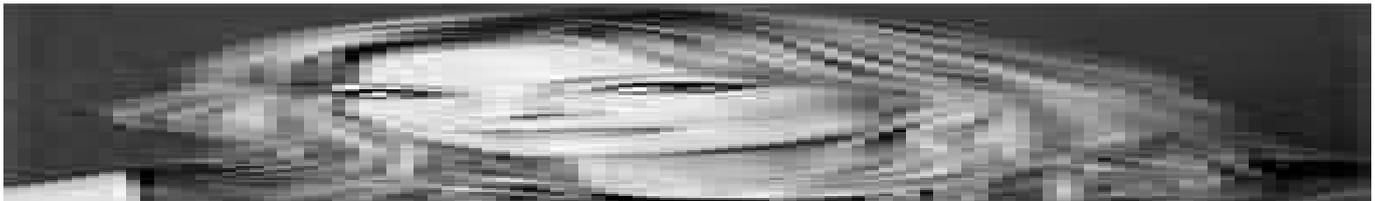


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