

Exit Interviews as a Retention Tool

When it comes to organizing exit interview processes, Bob Kustka, formerly HR director at Gillette for TechOps (R&D and engineering) and now a consultant, shares some basic measures with us:

You need to put a process in place so that exit interviews are conducted each time someone leaves, both voluntarily and involuntarily. Someone must be accountable for making them happen.

The interviews need to be structured. The first part of the interview should be operational, in which you discuss benefits, passwords, company property, and so on.

The second part addresses reasons for leaving. Even though the person is leaving and is no longer an employee, you should ask her not only why she is leaving, but also any suggestions she may have for improving the company or her department.

... there needs to be some level of documentation so that you can correlate the data and notice any trends or departments that might need restructuring.

HR consultant Bill Catlette (unapologetic author of *Contented Cows MOOve Faster*) adds that exit interviews should be "planned, but not programmed."

"You start by asking the same basic questions of everyone," Catlette tells I L O researchers, "but follow-up questions are determined by the interviewee's responses."

Catlette gives us three basics that should be included:

- 1. The level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the main components of organizational life such as work, pay, benefits, management, opportunity, recognition, and so on.*
- 2. The specific factors that caused the separation.*
- 3. Suggested changes.*

Catlette believes **"the interviewee should also be given an opportunity to comment on those things that went well in their involvement" with the company, including "making mention of individuals they found especially helpful."**

Professional development specialist Francie Dalton advises companies to conduct exit interviews "as expertly as you conduct new hire interviews."

Dalton stresses that the information from well-done exit interviews "can reveal hidden vulnerabilities, management deficiencies, needed structural and compensation changes, and so on." She advises taking the time to go in depth: "Get underneath what the individual is telling you. Probe for causal factors, radial impacts, specific examples, and theme."

Conducting "Stay" Interviews

In conversation with I L O researchers, several experts emphasized the exceeding value of "stay" interviews over "exit" interviews.

Workplace expert Donna Flagg of The Krysalis Group reminds us that **"exit interviews are a hindsight approach ... if they are built and executed properly, the information that they produce should shift over time if it has been acted upon and addressed effectively."**

Flagg says the exit interview process should be viewed as research and "should be used to create effective change," serving "as an important evaluation tool for the organization."

As Catlette puts it, **"Though we learn from employment 'autopsies,' research on the 'living' is preferable** and far more effective when it comes to improving employee retention."

One process he suggests is:

... periodically think about some of their best people, and then answer the question, 'Why does this person stay?' In all likelihood, that will lead to a very beneficial conversation with those individuals, and the relationship will be further strengthened.

Another measure he recommends is diligent use of employee satisfaction surveys. Organizations that are effective at this "incorporate the employee survey results into their regular business metrics." This can provide what he refers to as "the equivalent of color Doppler radar on issues that are involving employees today, and if left unattended, will impact customers and shareholders tomorrow."

Raymond T. Halagera, president and CEO of Career Systems International, echoes Catlette in stronger terms:

Why wait until after the horse is out of the barn to find out what motivated the horse to start thinking about jumping over the barn door?

Research shows that employees who voluntarily leave have been thinking about doing so six to twenty-four months before they actually do so. Accordingly, we highly recommend "stay interviews" whereby you ask your employees, "why do you stay here, what can we do, ensure we keep doing to keep you?"