

‘Why exactly are you leaving?’

BY SANDRA REDER

Why does someone leave an organization? The answer can often be found in an exit interview. So why don't more employers conduct them?

With the cost of turnover ranging from 50 per cent to 200 per cent of an annual salary, and a skilled labour shortage, it has become increasingly important to understand what you're doing right and wrong — people don't usually leave for one single reason.

But how can the exit process be done effectively? Here are some areas to focus on:

Encourage participation

Participating in an exit interview is voluntary. But if an organization takes the process seriously and the interview is well-structured and thorough, the person leaving will take it seriously.

Here are some of the reasons why people choose not to complete an exit interview:

- the interview is too long
- the interview questions are confusing or invasive
- the employee is angry at the company
- the employee doesn't believe what she says will make a difference
- fear of repercussions
- the process is difficult or uncomfortable.

Creating a process that addresses these concerns will go a long way to increasing the response rate, by communicating to the departing employee about why his feedback is important, how it will enable the organization to make improvements, how it is a confidential process and how it is easy to complete.

Consider time, place

There are two different thoughts on when an exit interview should be conducted — before the employee's last day or after she has left.

Pre-departure interviews provide an opportunity to reflect, review and potentially resolve issues, allowing both parties to separate on good terms. A potential downside is the departing employee may default to being nice and sugar-coating issues because a face-to-face meeting can be uncomfortable.

To foster a level of comfort, the setting should be private and relaxed — even if an online exit survey is used. In-person exit interviews should never be conducted by the departing employee's immediate manager or supervisor. Typically, they are conducted by someone in HR, another manager or a third party.

Conducting an exit interview after a person has left allows some time and distance from the employer, since leaving a job is an emotional time. Allowing some space will mean the departing employee participates in the exit interview process more objectively.

But the risk is that, once the employee has left, she no longer feels connected or compelled to participate.

In some cases, employers opt to conduct a pre-departure exit interview and then follow up a few months later with a post-departure interview (typically online) as well.

Ask the right questions

Keep questions simple. A typical interview should encompass between 35 to 60 questions so it doesn't feel too long and uncomfortable. Employers should use the exit interview process to find out:

- the two main reasons why the employee is leaving
- the steps the organization could have taken to keep the employee
- the employee's thoughts on workplace morale
- what he liked about the company
- what he would change about the company
- how he was recognized and appreciated
- if he felt there were opportunities for advancement and growth
- if he felt he received enough training
- if he felt he was provided with a clear definition of his role and the expectations of him in the role
- if he felt he received consistent and constructive feedback on his performance.

Assess the feedback

It is important to track all feedback from exit interviews and to watch for developing trends. This data should be centralized and kept strictly confidential. When patterns emerge, consider how and what can realistically be done to prevent the future loss of good employees.

This data becomes a great tool for developing programs that improve the workplace and, ultimately, affect morale and employee retention. It is important to let existing employees know that any changes being made may be the result of feedback from exit interviews. It will show them you listened, cared and saw the value in their feedback.

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