

Exit Interviews

1. An Overview

Exit interviews are interviews conducted with departing employees, just before they leave. From the employer's perspective, the primary aim of the exit interview is to understand the reasons for the person's departure, on the basis that criticism is a helpful driver for Company improvement. The exit interview is an ideal opportunity for the Company to find out the employees' perception of the Company. The exit interview takes place at a time when the employee feels they have nothing to lose through being open and honest and it is normally the case that employees feel able to tell the employer things they may not have had the opportunity or courage to say earlier.

Exit interviews (and prior) are also an opportunity for the Company to enable transfer of knowledge and experience from the departing employee to a successor or replacement, or even to brief a team on current projects, issues and contacts.

Good exit interviews should also yield useful information about the Company, to assess and improve all aspects of the working environment, culture, processes and systems, management and development.

The exit interview should look to elicit all information that determines the quality of the Company, both in terms of its relationship with its staff, customers, suppliers, third-parties and the general public. Many employers ignore the opportunity that exit interviews offer, chiefly because exit interviews have not been practised in the past. Starting to use exit interviews can be a difficult initiative to undertake, given the potentially subjective and 'fuzzy' nature of the results; the time involved; and the unspoken corporate urge to avoid exposure to criticism. Exit interviews are nevertheless a unique chance to survey and analyse the opinions of departing employees, who generally are more open, constructive and objective than staff still in their jobs. In leaving a Company, departing employees are liberated, and as such provide a richer source of objective feedback than employed staff when responding to staff attitude surveys.

If a Company is insecure and defensive this can potentially be an obstacle to implementing an exit interview processes. NOTE: It is important that wherever possible the departing employee's line manager does not conduct the exit interview as this may inhibit an honest and open dialogue from the departing employee.

From the departing employee's interviewee perspective, an exit interview is a chance to give some constructive feedback, and to leave on a positive note, with good relations and mutual respect.

Recrimination, blame, revenge and spite are destructive feelings and behaviours, so resist any temptation to place the departing employee on the defensive. It is important that the interviewer is impartial, calm, fair, objective and as helpful as possible. In the future an employee may wish to return to the Company (situations and people change), or the departing employee may cross the paths of ex-colleagues, managers, suppliers and clients in the future. The exit interview is an opportunity to shake hands and leave friends, not enemies.

2. Knowledge Transfer

The days, weeks (or months in some cases) between the decision for the employee to leave, and the employee's actual departure date offer a crucial opportunity for the Company to gather important information and knowledge from the employee.

This is especially relevant in roles where the employee has accumulated a significant amount of knowledge and personal connections, as typically applies in sales and buying roles, and obviously business unit management. The knowledge of the departing employee commonly has immense value, and the recovery of it is often overlooked altogether by the Company, until the employee has departed, or more likely been hurried out of the door holding the contents of their desk in a cardboard box.

When any employee resigns, or a decision is made for a person to leave for any reason, always ask the question, 'Should we spend some time thinking about how to enable some sort of knowledge transfer?'. In other words, if we place a value on the knowledge that the departing employee holds, isn't it worth thinking about how to enable this knowledge to be passed to the appropriate people remaining in the Company?

Most departing employees are delighted to share this knowledge, to help a successor, or to brief a management team, if only the Company would simply ask them politely to do so (assuming their exit is handled decently of course, which the exit interview helps to enable).

2.1 Knowledge Transfer Questions

Start thinking about using these questions as soon as you know that the employee will be leaving. These questions are most appropriate for the employee's line manager, supervisor or colleagues to explore.

- How might we benefit from your knowledge, experience, introductions to your contacts, and prior to your departure?

- Would you be happy to take part in a briefing meeting with managers/replacements/successor/colleagues so that we can benefit from your knowledge and experience, prior to your leaving?
- What can we do to enable you to pass on as much of your knowledge and experience as possible to your replacement/successor prior to your departure?
- How and when would you prefer to pass on your knowledge to your successor?
- I realise that you'll not be happy with the situation surrounding your departure, however we would really appreciate it if you could help us to understand some of the important things you've been working on - how might we agree for this information to be transferred?
- We'd be grateful for you to introduce (name of successor) to your key contacts before you go - are you happy to help with this?

As ever, you will derive most for the Company, and be able to give most help to the departing employee, by being positive, constructive, understanding and helpful, prior to and during the exit process. Treat people with integrity and decency, and generally they will respond in kind.

3. Aims and Outcomes

- Exit interviews are seen by existing employee's as a sign of a positive culture. They are regarded as caring and compassionate - a sign that the Company is willing to accept constructive criticism.
- In the main, employee leavers will be people that the Company is actually sorry to lose. The exit interview therefore provides an excellent source of comment and opportunity relating to management succession planning.
- Research has shown that employees normally leave because of issues regarding their direct supervision/management and a lack of personal training and development opportunities. If either of these issues is highlighted through the exit interview, it will give the Company an opportunity to address them in the future.
- The exit interview helps to support a Company's HR practices. They are seen as positive and necessary for quality and effective people-management by most professional institutes and accrediting bodies concerned with quality management of people, company's and services.
- Using a standard form format and a standard exit process will enable the Company to evaluate the results. Analysis of exit interviews will provide relevant and useful data that will directly link into training needs analysis and training planning processes.
- Exit interviews can also provide valuable information that may link directly to improvements in the recruitment and induction process of new employees.
- Exit interviews provide direct indications as to how to improve staff retention.

- Sometimes an exit interview provides the chance to retain a valuable employee who would otherwise have left (Company's often accept resignations far too readily without discussion or testing the firmness of feeling - the exit interview provides a final safety net).
- Every Company has at any point in time several good people on the verge of leaving because they are not given the opportunity to grow and develop, at the same time, ironically, that most of the management and executives are overworked and stretched, some to the point of leaving too. Doesn't it therefore make good sense to raise the importance of marrying these two situations to provide advantage both ways - ie. facilitate greater delegation of responsibility to those who want it? Exit interviews are an excellent catalyst for identifying specific mistakes and improvement opportunities in this vital area of management development and succession.
- Exit interviews, and a properly organised, positive exit process also greatly improve the chances of successfully obtaining and transferring useful knowledge, contacts, insights, tips and experience, from the departing employee to all those needing to know it, especially successors and replacements. Most leavers are happy to help if you have ask and provide a suitable method for the knowledge transfer, be it a briefing meeting, a one-to-one meeting between the replacement and the leaver, or during the exit interview itself.

4. The Process

Exit interviews are best conducted face-to-face because this enables better communication, understanding and interpretation. It can also provide a far better opportunity to probe and get to the root of sensitive or reluctant feelings. To aid the process and ensure consistency it is important to provide an exit questionnaire to the exiting employee prior to the interview. Providing the questionnaire prior to the interview has the added benefit of allowing the exiting employee time to prepare for the interview and to think of what they would like to say.

The following process should be followed beginning from the minute you know one of your employees is leaving:

- i. If the employee tells you they are leaving verbally, then have a discussion with them and if after your discussion they confirm that they are definitely planning to leave, ask them to put their resignation in writing. To ensure confidentiality be sure to arrange for this discussion to be held in a private location where you are not likely to be overheard.
- ii. Following receipt of a written resignation the Company should respond in writing to the employee. Remember that some of these details may be covered in your employment contract which will take precedence over what is done and said when an employee hands in their notice. If the Company has an employee handbook it is important that you refer to it as it may provide information for you regarding the leavers' process and the content of any

correspondence. The Company may have rules in the employment handbook that may explain what happens to annual leave etc when an employee resigns. If there is no reference to what happens when someone resigns in either the contract or employment handbook then follow the process and formulas noted below. Prior to writing the letter check the Company rules, if there are any, to ensure you know who would write and sign this letter, do not assume that it is appropriate for it to come from the supervisor or manager, although in the absence of an HR or Personnel Department they may draft the letter for someone else to sign.

The letter should provide the employee with the details listed below.

- The employee's last working day. This is calculated by referring to the contract of employment and any subsequent changes which may have been made to it. If the contract requires an employee to give one-month notice, then the last working day will be one month from the day they have given the Company their written notice. Please note that it is not uncommon to require an employee to give less notice if they are still working within the probation period and it may be the case that more notice is required from employees with long service or in some of the more senior positions in the Company.
- The number of days annual leave the employee is entitled to. This may mean the employee still has a number of days left to take or they may have taken more annual leave than they are entitled to. In either case, you will need to calculate the number of days the employee is entitled to; this is referred to as the pro rata annual leave. If there is a Company formula that has been used for this calculation then follow the company's existing rules. If you do not have a standard way for calculating the pro rata annual leave then use the following formula.

Up to last day of employment

To calculate holiday due, take full annual entitlement (X days) divide by 52 weeks then multiply by number of weeks worked since the beginning of the holiday year, including the notice period. Round up to the nearest ½ day.

- Having calculated the number of days the employee is entitled to and having referred to the contract and employment handbook, the letter must detail what will happen with the entitlement due to either party or to state that there is no outstanding leave. In the absence of any references in the contract or employment handbook, employees can either be asked to work additional days if they owe the Company for excess holiday they have taken or a deduction can be made from their final salary payment. If the employee is entitled to take more annual leave than they have taken, then they may wish to leave early and be paid for any outstanding leave. If this situation has

happened in the past and the Company has a standard way of treating it this is commonly referred to as custom and practice. You should treat all resignations the same and if you are planning to change what has been custom and practice you will need to ensure that you treat everyone the same and do not change it in a way which could be interpreted as discriminatory.

- The letter should also tell the employee the date and how (cheque, bank money transfer) the Company will be making the last salary payment.
 - Most countries will also have some formal documentation that is required. In the UK any employee leaving an employer is required to receive a document referred to as a P45 and this document is provided after the final salary payment is made. The P45 must be given to the employees' new employer. It is likely that there is formal documentation required in every country. The same person or Company that is responsible for completing the payroll normally completes this document.
 - The letter should also provide information regarding any of the other benefits the employee is entitled to, explaining when the entitlement will end and if there is additional documentation they will either receive or are required to complete. For example, if the Company provided a pension, when will the last payment be made and what will happen to it once payments are no longer being made. If the employee has a company car, laptop or perhaps a mobile phone, it is important that they are told how, when and to whom they are to return these items.
 - In all cases, be sure that the employment contract, the employment handbook, custom and practice and local legislation are taken into consideration and where rules are set out with regard to an employment relationship ending however it has come about, these rules must be followed.
 - The letter should also refer to the exit interview questionnaire and the exit interview. Do not assume that the employee understands what these are. It is important that they are not apprehensive about these so a short explanation of why you are asking them to participate in them will set their mind at rest and they will not worry about it. The letter should tell them when they will receive the questionnaire, when and where the interview will take place and who will be conducting the exit interview.
 - Lastly, the letter should end with a short note thanking the employee for their valued contribution to the Company and how their contribution will be missed.
- iii. Book the exit interview in the employees and interviewers diary and reserve a meeting room or office in which it can be conducted. If you do not have anyone internal that would be appropriate to conduct the exit interview you may wish to ask your Business Coach to conduct it on your behalf.

- iv. If the employee has Company equipment or benefits which need to be returned ensure that arrangements are made for this to take place.
- v. If your offices or other premises have security systems which the leaving employee had access to you may need to make arrangements to alter security codes or ensure that you get any keys back from the employee, making sure that no copies have been made.
- vi. If your employee has access to computer systems you will need to make arrangements to remove their access and to change any passwords after they have left.
- vii. For the purposes of handing over work related responsibilities, it is important that the supervisor or manager spends time with the leaving employee. This should be arranged as soon as possible to ensure adequate planning in relation to the work related duties the employee has. A planning meeting should be arranged where both parties can work together to ensure that all work related duties are completed and or handed over to someone else to pick up.

5. The Exit Interview

In terms of managing the interview, it is important that the interviewer listens rather than talks and uses good questioning techniques to ensure that the employee feels comfortable and provides as much relevant information as possible. Give the interviewee time and space to answer. Coax and reassure where appropriate, rather than pressurise. Interpret, reflect and understand (you can understand someone without necessarily agreeing). Keep calm, resist the urge to defend or argue - your aim is to elicit views, feedback and answers be sure to resist any impulse which may lead you to lecture or admonish.

Ask open 'what/how/why' questions, not 'closed' yes/no questions, unless you require specific confirmation about a point. 'When' and 'where' are also more specific qualifying questions, unless of course they are used in a general context rather than specific time or geographic sense. Questions beginning with 'Who' should be used with care. The exit interview is not designed to be a witch-hunt or encourage defamatory comments. An exit interviewee is likely to be uncomfortable if asked to name people or allocate personal blame - exit interviews are not about 'blame', the allocation of which is not constructive and should be avoided for anything other than very serious complaints or accusations. Any statements made by the interviewee must be suitably referred as follow-up would be beyond the normal exit interview remit and any serious complaints or accusations should be investigated carefully and thoroughly prior to any potential action being taken.

Prepare your exit interview questions and topics that you'd like to explore, especially when you believe that the interviewee has good experience, appreciation and understanding. Take notes and/or use a prepared questionnaire form.

Remember simple planning aspects such as arranging a suitable time and place, avoiding interruptions, taking notes, preparing questions, being aware of the body-language and feelings of the interviewee and adjusting your own approach accordingly.

Obviously the style of exit interview is different for someone who is being asked to leave*, retiring*, being made redundant*, dismissed*, or leaving under a cloud*, compared to an employee leaving whom the Company would prefer to retain. However everyone who leaves should be given the opportunity of an exit interview, and the Company can learn something from every situation. In certain situations (where appropriate) the exit interview also provides a last chance to change a person's mind, although this should not be the main aim of the exit interview situation. *NOTE: Additional white papers and documentation will be provided for some of the situations as noted above.

When the interview is complete say thanks and wish the interviewee well. If there is some specific checking or follow-up to do then ensure you do it and report back accordingly.

After the interview review the answers and think through the responses that were given with a detached and objective view and consider the meaning and implications of the employees' comments.

As a direct result of the interview the Company may need to take action. This may depend on the Company's processes for analysing and reporting exit interview feedback. If there is an urgent issue, or the person wants to stay and you want to keep them, then act immediately or the opportunity will be lost.

Research shows that the top three reasons employees leave an employer are:

- Dissatisfaction with the immediate supervisor or manager;
- Dissatisfaction with career progression or training and development opportunities
- Dissatisfaction with changes being made within the Company or with the Company Culture

It is rarely the case that an employee will leave solely as a result of dissatisfaction with their pay and benefits. However, this may initially appear to be the case as the employee may perceive it to be easier or perhaps safer for them to talk about money than to attribute their resignation to some of the other reasons. Effective interview questions will ensure that the reason the employee is leaving are fully explored.

5.1 Sample Exit Interview Questions

These questions can be used in face-to-face exit interviews, or to compile exit interview proforma questionnaires or electronic feedback forms. Where possible compile forms to be used for large-scale analysis taking care to format the questions into a format which can be analysed numerically.

NOTE: See sample Exit Interview Questionnaire

In face-to-face interviews particularly, use the word 'why' if you want to probe, especially if the first answer is vague or superficial. Questions beginning with 'what' and 'how' are better for getting people to think and convey to you properly and honestly about their views. Some of these questions samples are more suitable for management employees, although always give people at all levels the chance to comment on issues normally 'above' their remit - you'll be surprised at how informed and insightful people can be. These question examples noted are not sequential, although broadly there is logic to the order of the types of questions. This list contains more questions than the interviewer would normally ask in a typical exit interview. Pick the questions that are most relevant to the leaving circumstances, the interviewee and the Company situation. Clearly where an exit form has been completed it is important to spend some time reviewing the responses and where appropriate exploring relevant areas in some depth.

- Tell me about how you've come to decide to leave?
- What is your main reason for leaving?
- What are the other reasons for your leaving?
- Why is this important or so significant for you?
- Within the (particular reason to leave) what was it that concerned you particularly?
- What could have been done early on to prevent the situation developing/provide a basis for you to stay with us?
- How would you have preferred the situation(s) to have been handled?
- What opportunities can you see might have existed for the situation/problems to have been averted/dealt with satisfactorily?
- What can you say about the processes and procedures or systems that have contributed to the problem(s)/your decision to leave?
- What specific suggestions would you have for how the Company could manage this situation/these issues better in future?
- How do you feel about the Company?
- What has been good/enjoyable/satisfying for you in your time with us?
- What has been frustrating/difficult/upsetting to you in your time with us?
- What could you have done better or more for us had we given you the opportunity?
- What extra responsibility would you have welcomed that you were not given?

- How could the Company have enabled you to make fuller use of your capabilities and potential?
- What training would you have liked or needed that you did not get, and what effect would this have had?
- How well do think your training and development needs were assessed and met?
- What training and development that you have completed, did you find most helpful and enjoyable?
- What can you say about communications within the Company/your department?
- What improvements do you think can be made to customer service and relations?
- How would you describe the culture or 'feel' of the Company?
- What could you say about communications and relations between departments, and how these could be improved?
- Were you developed/inducted adequately for your role(s)?
- What improvement could be made to the way that you were inducted/prepared for your role(s)?
- (For recent recruits of less than a year or so:) What did you think about the way we recruited you? How did the reality alter from your expectations when you first joined us? How could we have improved your own recruitment? How could your induction training have been improved?
- How could you have been helped to better know/understand/work with other departments necessary for the Company to perform more effectively?
- What can you say about the way your performance was measured, and the feedback to you of your performance results?
- How well do you think the appraisal system worked for you?
- What would you say about how you were motivated, and how that could have been improved?
- What suggestion would you make to improve working conditions, hours, shifts, amenities, etc?
- What would you say about equipment and machinery that needs replacing or upgrading, or which isn't fully/properly used for any reason?
- What can you say about the way you were managed?... On a day to day basis?..... And on a month to month basis?
- How would you have changed the expectations/objectives/aims (or absence of) that were placed on you? And why?
- What, if any, ridiculous examples of policy, rules, instructions, can you highlight?

- What examples of ridiculous waste (material or effort), pointless reports, meetings, bureaucracy, etc., could you point to?
- How could the Company reduce stress levels among employees where stress is an issue?
- How could the Company have enabled you to have made better use of your time?
- What things did the Company or management do to make your job more difficult/frustrating/non-productive?
- How can the Company gather and make better use of the views and experience of its people?
- Aside from the reason(s) you are leaving, how strongly were you attracted to committing to a long and developing career with us?
- What can the Company do to retain its best people (and not lose any more like you)?
- Have you anything to say about your treatment from a discrimination or harassment perspective?
- Would you consider working again for us if the situation were right?
- Are you happy to say where you are going (if you have decided)?
- What particularly is it about them that makes you want to join them?
- What, importantly, are they offering that we are not?
- (If appropriate:) Could you be persuaded to renegotiate/stay/discuss the possibility of staying?
- Can we be of any particular help to you in this move/deciding what to do next (we can't promise anything obviously)?

6. Responsibilities

Participation in an exit interview by the departing employee is voluntary. Be sure that a departing employee does not feel compelled to attend exit interviews. Where possible offer the questionnaire form as an alternative especially if an individual does not wish to participate in an interview. Do remember that the questionnaire is also voluntary. If presented in a positive way most employees will be pleased to find that their opinion is valued and will welcome the opportunity to provide constructive feedback to the Company.

Ideally the Company should have a documented policy stating how exit interviews happen, when, and by whom. Some Company's hand the responsibility to a skilled interviewer in the HR or Personnel department. As a last resort the line-manager or even supervisors can conduct the interview, but this is not recommended and every other option should be considered.

An interviewer should be trained to interview, just as the Company would for job interviews. All types of interviews are sensitive, emotional situations which require ability and maturity to manage properly, especially if interviewee is anxious or volatile.

In large Company's HR or the Personnel department are normally responsible for designing the process, issuing guidelines and documentation, collecting results data, analysing and reporting findings, trends, opportunities and recommendations, especially including anything relating to health and safety, or employment law and liability.

If you design a questionnaire or exit interview form which will be used as an input document towards central analysis it is a good idea to convert questions wherever practicable into a 'scoreable' and/or multiple-choice format, which makes analysis far easier than lots of written opinions.

Actions resulting from exit interview feedback analysis, in any size or type of Company, fall into two categories:

- **Remedial and preventative**, for example improving health and safety issues, stress, harassment, discrimination. etc.
- **Strategic improvement opportunities**, for example improved induction, management or supervisory training, empowerment or team building initiatives, process improvement, wastage and efficiencies improvements, customer service initiatives, etc.

The head of HR or Personnel would normally be responsible for raising these issues with the board or CEO, and the conversion of exit interview feedback into action is a critical factor in justifying and maintaining a serious priority and operation of the process.

NOTE: See the sample Exit Interview Form available, if you do not have one, ask your Business Coach for an example you can refer to in designing one for your organisation.