

One Question Before You Go: Employee Exit Interviews



Your employee has just announced he/she is leaving and the off-boarding process begins. When looking over the off-boarding process checklist there are often many tasks that need to be accomplished. One of those tasks, hovering near the bottom, is the often-interesting, sometimes informative, exit interview.

Some people say that the exit interview can be a rich source of information and others tell you it is a waste of time and energy. Indeed the exit interview can be a waste of time and energy but it can also be a source of information if you know what you are looking for and how to get it.

Ideally the information you obtain at the exit interview should be consistent with the information you are obtaining when you regularly conduct your employee satisfaction and engagement feedback surveys. Both of these activities are designed to gain information to help improve organization performance based on employee feedback.

8 Sample Questions to ask in an exit interview (but don't ask all 8, try to stick with 4 to 6)

- 1. When or how long ago did you begin thinking about leaving our organization?** Timelines can help you look back and see if there were any contributing factors such as a change in supervision, company changes or other factors.
- 2. What are the primary reasons you are leaving the organization?** Sometimes employees leave for what appear to be very personal reasons such as more time with family or health. As with any information you collect looking for patterns can be useful. If employees in certain roles or departments or teams frequently leave for similar reasons, including better paying jobs, different opportunities, personal reasons and so on there may be a pattern worth examining.
- 3. What 3 things did you like most about working for our organization?** This is a good way to help learn what others value and may help you understand the image of your company culture and working conditions.
- 4. What things did you dislike about your role, department and the organization in general?** Similarly to the information you can gather by asking what employees like, you can learn about the perception and experience of working in your organization by finding what people don't like. If the person does not cite anything of just cites pay try to probe and ask about what they would change or

like to see done differently.

5. **How well did the role align with your initial expectations of the role based on the job description and initial interviews?** You can gain some interesting perspectives when you ask a question about expectations. This can sometimes tell you if your job descriptions and hiring process are hitting the mark
6. **Did you ever mention or discuss that you were unhappy or looking for something different before deciding to leave?** Sometimes employees aren't consciously aware they are unhappy until they are presented with another offer that peaks their interest but often they have been dropping hints for sometime. This can be an opportunity to see if there were missed signals or if your organization does not have in place opportunities to ask employees how they are doing.
7. **Can you pinpoint any clear event, incident or moment that contributed to your desire to look for or accept another opportunity.** When you ask this question you are trying to tap into the employees reaction. In many cases there may be no outstanding event but often there is a moment when the employee decided to go and you may find their memory of that to be a telling one.
8. **What advice would you give to the person who will take over your role?** When you ask someone to think of someone else you can tap into their desire to help another person and they will often use themselves as a frame of reference. As with the former question this can be an excellent way to tap into some insightful information.

3 Exit Interview Strategies

The biggest hurdles in getting useful information from an exit interview include the employee who is concerned about not getting a favourable reference as a result of saying anything negative, the employee who is apathetic about the organization and offers little of value and the employee who is hostile (including not only those who were terminated but also those who left for a 'better' job). Consider these strategies to help create effective exit interviews:

1. **Explain the purpose of the exit interview.** Let a departing employee know you value their insights and experience by telling them the exit interview will be used to help make changes in the organization. Set this up as believable by previously making changes and citing former employee's feedback from exit interviews.
2. **Who Conducts the Interview?** Generally a departing employees supervisor or manager or HR conducts exit interviews. There are pros and cons to any of these people conducting the exit interview. If the employee did not have a positive relationship with a manager or if the manager feels upset about the departure of an employee the interview might be of little value. One of the options to consider is asking the employee who they would like to have conduct the exit interview. Regardless of who conducts it this should be a one-to-one meeting.
3. **How is the Interview conducted?** Some organizations give an employee a survey to complete and return and others hold person-to-person meetings (face-to-face or over the phone). Person-to-person interviews can be useful as it allows you to probe for information. It can be beneficial to provide the departing employee with 2 or 3 questions ahead of time and ask them to submit or bring their responses to an exit interview.

The departure of an employee can be a cause for celebration, sadness, reflection and, with an effective exit interview process, an opportunity to learn.