Use “Stay Interviews” to Boost Retention & Cut Turnover



Passivity and complacency are lethal to retention. Just ask the companies that didn’t learn that key employees were unhappy until after they announced that they were leaving. It’s a pretty good bet that HR directors of these firms are kicking themselves for not making proactive efforts to identify the employee’s issues while there was still time to fix them. One effective strategy for doing this is to require managers to carry out so-called “Stay Interviews” with high-value employees that you want to keep in the fold. Here’s an X-point briefing you can use to orient managers to stay interviews and how to conduct them effectively. There’s also a Stay Interview template on the HR Insider site that you can adapt for your own use.

Stay Interview Briefing to Managers

As a manager, you play a vital role in helping the Company retain its key employees. This briefing is designed to familiarize you with a function you must employ in carrying out that role, namely, performing what are called “Stay Interviews” with current employees. Do a good job with a Stay Interview and you probably won’t have to do an Exit Interview with that employee.

1. **What a Stay Interview Is – and Is Not**

A Stay Interview is:

- A forward-looking conversation about what keeps an employee engaged.
- A retention and risk management tool.
- An opportunity to reduce turnout risk by identifying and fixing resolvable issues that may otherwise lead to resignation.

A Stay Interview is not:

- A performance review.
- A disciplinary discussion.
- A compensation negotiation.

- A complaint investigation.

2. Preparing for the Stay Interview

Your job during the Stay Interview is to listen to what the employee has to say, not to defend yourself, the company, or its managers and policies. Let employees speak their minds and then let us know what the problem is. To prepare:

- Review the employee's current role, tenure, and any recent changes.
- Find a private setting in which you can conduct the interview without outside distraction or interruption.
- Reserve sufficient time, at least 30 minutes, for the interview.
- Prepare and review your Stay Interview questions in advance.
- Be prepared to escalate any issues you can't resolve alone.

3. Setting the Stay Interview Tone

To set the right tone, use a simple opening script or words to the following effect: "This conversation is about understanding what's working for you and what could be better, so we can make this a place you want to stay."

4. Asking Stay Interview Questions Effectively

Prepare your Stay Interview questions in advance with these principles in mind:

Do:

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Listen closely to the answer.
- Take notes and let the interviewee know that you'll be doing so.
- Use neutral follow-ups, such as, "Tell me more about that."

Don't:

- Argue or explain away the employee's concerns.
- Promise outcomes you can't deliver.
- Compare the employee to others.
- Take criticism personally.
- Try to defend the company or yourself.

5. Handling Compensation Concerns

If an employee complains or expresses concern about compensation:

- Acknowledge the concern but refrain from negotiating on the spot.
- Clearly explain the escalation paths and next steps.
- Document and refer the concern to HR, if required.

6. Handling Career Growth Issues

Recognize that the employee's career growth questions, concerns, and prospects are

sensitive issues that must be handled carefully:

- Explore the employee's skills and interests, not just promotions.
- Discuss lateral or project-based opportunities.
- Identify credentialing, licensing, training or certification pathways and opportunities, if applicable.

7. **Handling Workload, Stress or Burnout Issues**

When discussing these matters:

- Treat the employee's concerns or problems as a health issue.
- Thank employees for their honesty in bringing these matters up.
- Escalate health-related issues or requests for reasonable accommodations to HR promptly.
- Don't make promises or assurances unless you're 100% sure you can keep them.
- Avoid being defensive.

8. **Recognizing & Respecting Legal & Compliance Boundaries**

Recognize that the matters discussed and manner of discussion may have legal and liability ramifications.

- Escalate discrimination, workplace harassment, mental health and safety issues to HR promptly.
- Refrain from asking about or probing into the interviewee's physical or mental health.
- Avoid responses or statements that may in any way come across as retaliatory or discriminatory.

9. **Stay Interview Follow-UpActions**

Failing to follow up with the promises or assurances you make during the Stay Interview increases turnover risk more than not discussing the issue at all. So, after the Stay Interview ends:

- Summarize key issues, questions, and concerns discussed.
- Avoid generic or vague assurances like, "We'll look into it".
- If feasible, realistic, and advantageous, agree to take specific actions in response to the employee's concerns, which may include workload or schedule adjustments, offering training or development opportunities and improving communication and support.
- Assign follow-up action responsibilities and timelines.
- Share relevant information with HR.
- Schedule a follow-up check-in.
- Close the loop with the employee—even if the answer turns out to be "no."

10. **Manager Accountability for Stay Interviews**

Recognize that the Company evaluates Stay Interviews in measuring managers' job performance and success, including with regard to:

- Completion of stay interviews.
- Quality of follow-up actions.
- Reduction in turnover of employees who undergo Stay Interviews.
- Improvement in such employees’ engagement, absenteeism, or other indicators.