What Exit Interviews Reveal About Workplace Resilience & Engagement and How HR Can Act Before It’s Too Late



Exit interviews are often treated as a final checkbox when an employee has already decided to leave. However, in the Canadian labour market, this approach may be costing organizations more than they realize.

Statistics Canada data shows that job vacancies fell to 524,300 in the first quarter of 2025, down 18.1% year over year. Although this number suggests the labour market is stabilizing, organizations can’t afford to rest on their retention strategies just yet. The ebb and flow of hiring and offboarding can often hinge on the details shared in exit interviews, which play a much larger role than administrative cleanup.

Departures tell a story that workplace leaders may overlook. Exit interviews can form what’s called a *“resentment report,”* a framework for identifying the reasons employees leave, which may only surface when it’s too late to retain them. Still, these reports offer HR leaders an important learning opportunity to understand why employees are leaving and how to act on it before it’s too late.

What Exit Interviews are Really Telling Us

Most employees don’t leave over a single issue. Exit interviews help organizations identify the multiple factors that could lead employees to leave.

When compiled, workplaces may find common themes for employees leaving:

- Unclear career progression.
- Persistent workload pressure.
- Inconsistent management practices.
- Communication breakdowns.
- General sense of being undervalued.

Individually, these concerns may seem manageable, but together, they point to deeper organizational challenges.

What’s notable is that many of these issues aren’t new. They often surface during surveys or one-on-ones with managers, but may be softened to seem like minor concerns.

In contrast, exit interviews tend to be more candid. Employees who are leaving are more willing to articulate what didn't work.

The real value stems from identifying patterns. When multiple employees cite similar frustrations, particularly within the same team, role, or timeframe, it signals a systemic issue rather than a one-off concern.

Resilience, Engagement, and the Hidden Cost of Inaction

Exit interviews often reveal more than employee dissatisfaction; they also shine a spotlight on workplace resilience.

In this context, workplace resilience isn't about how well employees cope with pressure. Instead, it focuses on the organization's leadership practices and workplace culture. These factors shape how employee challenges are managed.

When workplace systems fall short and remain unaddressed, it can lead to a common workplace pattern of:

Declining engagement → resentment → turnover

This is where mental health becomes central to the conversation. The Government of Canada emphasizes that employers are responsible for protecting both the physical and psychological health of their workforce. With this in mind, consider that one in five Canadians experiences a mental health problem or illness each year, and mental health-related concerns account for roughly 30% of disability claims. The broader economic impact is estimated at $50 billion annually.

For employers, failing to support mental health in the workplace comes at both a tangible and intangible cost. Proactive support then becomes key as a part of the overall organizational strategy. In practice, this can look like:

- Manageable workloads
- Respectful leadership
- Clear expectations
- Opportunities for growth

When these standards are in place, workplaces will tend to experience:

- Less burnout
- Increased retention
- Improved productivity

When these elements are missing, they may surface as frustrations in exit interviews that can be taken as feedback to improve workplace retention. Exit interviews then serve as an indicator of a workplace's shortcomings, offering organizations the opportunity to improve underperforming areas.

Why Workplace Leaders Often Miss Warning Signals

Failure to Meaningfully Analyze Exit Interviews

Exit interviews collect data, but often don't assess or address why the employee left. Feedback could be documented and still be underused. Without aggregation or trend analysis, recurring issues remain hidden.

Retention is Overlooked Instead of Actively Monitored

Exit interviews capture insights once the employee has already decided to leave. When an employee disengages, the opportunity for retention has passed.

The Government of Canada's approach to workplace mental health reinforces the importance of acting earlier. National strategies emphasize three key priorities:

1. Building a respectful workplace culture.
2. Equipping leaders and employees with practical tools.
3. Measuring and reporting on progress consistently.

That last point is especially relevant. Without consistent measurement and review, organizations risk reacting only after problems escalate.

For many HR teams, particularly in small and mid-sized organizations, capacity can be another barrier. Limited resources often mean HR operates reactively, focusing on immediate issues rather than long-term patterns.

Turning Exit Feedback Into Early Action

Exit interviews are only valuable if organizations use them as a feedback system rather than treating them as a standalone process. Shifting from a reactive to a proactive approach to retention involves establishing an effective process, starting with three key steps:

1. **Standardizing exit interview questions** makes it easier to compare responses and identify trends. Implementing regular review cycles (quarterly over annually) helps ensure insights remain timely and actionable.
2. **Considering recurring patterns** such as absenteeism, engagement survey results, and performance data can all provide context. If exit interviews mention recurring workload concerns, and absenteeism is rising in the same department, the connection becomes harder to ignore.
3. **Communicating the data with leadership**. This can help inform decisions on management training, workload distribution, and communication practices.

The most effective organizations don't stop at exit interviews. They supplement retention efforts with earlier touchpoints, such as quarterly check-ins and pulse surveys, to capture feedback before disengagement leads to resignation.

Building a Culture That Surfaces Issues Earlier

Improving exit interviews is important, but it isn't the main goal. Rather, organizations should strive to reduce the main outcome for exit interviews as a primary source of insight.

That requires a shift toward continuous, attentive listening in other aspects of employee interaction, such as:

- Regular check-ins
- Open communication channels
- Psychologically safe environments

These all help make it easier for employees to share their concerns safely.

When employee feedback is normalized and acted on, it can increase workplace trust and make it more likely that issues are addressed before employees exit.

Managers play a critical role in shaping their employees' work lives. As the primary point of contact for most employees, they can directly impact engagement and retention through:

- Navigating conflict
- Supporting mental well-being
- Providing employees with the tools and training to manage workloads.

A workplace that encourages honest feedback without reprisal and applies it consistently is far more likely to retain its people than one that only listens at the point of exit.

Closing Thoughts

Exit interviews offer valuable insights for employers, but only when used strategically.

For Canadian organizations navigating evolving workforce expectations, the real opportunity lies in using that insight to act earlier. Patterns in exit feedback can highlight where resilience is breaking down, where engagement is slipping, and where systems may need to adapt.

The most resilient workplaces don't wait for employees to tell them what's not working. Instead, they build processes, culture, and leadership to identify and proactively address those issues.

About the Author

Sydney is an HR Consultant at Citation Canada, Certified Human Resources Professional (CHRP), and Certified Psychological Health and Safety Professional, with a client-focused approach and a dedication to creating practical, people-centric solutions. She brings experience in employee engagement, e-learning, and Canadian employment legislation, along with a background in project and customer relationship management. Sydney pairs her HR expertise with a creative edge, using visual design to make policies, presentations, and tools more engaging and accessible. Known for her approachable style, she helps organizations build compliant, productive, and people-first workplaces.