

# Don't wait for the Exit Interview – ask your employees the important questions now

by Caroline Reidy

**Exit interviews are interviews conducted with employees who are, for one reason or another, terminating their employment with a business. These are generally carried out within a few days of their resignation being recognised, either on their last day of work or a few days previous or subsequent to this.**

From the perspective of the employer, the principal purpose of an exit interview is to identify the reasons an employee felt the need to leave their organisation. Exit interviews are an ideal opportunity for an employer to listen to their outgoing employees, follow up on information received, and apply it to all remaining employees and the business as a whole. Exit interviews are pointless unless the advice is genuinely taken on board and executed. The feedback gained is potentially subjective, but this is an effective way of learning about the organisation and the employee's impression of it. Although such a scenario will not always come to pass, the departing employee has no benefit in characterising the company in a solely pessimistic or biased way. They are now independent of the business and therefore it is a good source of distributing constructive feedback, which is a method of critique that offers actionable and effective feedback to facilitate the receiver implementing improvement strategies.

The employer can then use this information to improve their organisation, as well as ensuring they rectify mistakes to halt other employees from departing too, hence increasing staff retention. It also gives the employer first-hand feedback on their managers and supervisors. They are also a chance for the outgoing staff to pinpoint the positive aspects of their employment. This way, the company can learn what they are doing right. It gives them the luxury to then focus on the outlying issues while maintaining the positives in the background. Additionally, it's probable that the employee has recently

been job hunting. Interviewing them can reveal some valuable testimony on how the company compares with its competitors.

Exit interviews also provide a more accurate reflection of a company's culture. The employer is gathering accurate insights about their organisation and its people. It can allow them to identify any training needs required by some or all employees, whether on a performance or behavioural front. These insights can aid to improve organisational strategy, thus leading to action which will improve overall business culture, it could be ascertained that one section of a business needs more training with

regards to their performance. Another example could be inappropriate behaviour by certain employees. An employee may be too afraid to report them while working with them but would probably have little hesitation in doing so during an exit interview. This could lead employees to receiving deserved disciplinary action, or it could assist the employer in identifying employees who need extra training in certain areas.

## What not to do in an exit Interview

The number one thing not to do in an interview, for both parties, is to be negative or toxic. It serves no benefit to



anyone. These interviews portray the concept of constructive criticism. Even if the employee is providing negative feedback, it should be done in a positive way. They are admitting things they may not have been comfortable with before. It is in the best interests of neither party for an exit interview to be defensive. Although the employer may be hearing some harsh truths, they should only be revealed with the aim of improving the organisation going forward. It also allows the employee to finish their employment with the company on a satisfactory note, as well as not jeopardising a possible character reference in the future.

You should be honest but fair. One's working life is very long. An employee doesn't need to close the door on possibly returning to the firm in the future. On top of that, everyone has contacts in an industry. A prospective future employer might have close ties with your previous employer. Going out on a negative note with one employer could sabotage your chances of employment with another. Despite how much issues you may feel a company has, if you overly focus on the negatives then you will most likely be viewed as bitter and hostile. As a result, you will be portrayed as someone simply out to get the employer and your remarks might not even be taken seriously. Any genuine advice you had for improving the company will not be followed up on.

Reputation and employer branding are key to attracting and retaining staff. If an employee is unhappy leaving their exit interview, they are likely to confide in others about how they feel. This only serves to generate a bad reputation for the company and may deter people from applying for a job with them. According to the World Economic Forum, one-quarter of a company's market value can be directly correlated to its reputation, and 87% of executives believe that reputational challenges are more important than other strategic risks. That's information you simply can't ignore.

### Misuse of exit interviews

Despite the blatantly obvious upsides of conducting exit interviews, the undeniable reality is that some

organisations don't use them. This can be due to numerous reasons, such as the length of time they take or to dodge criticisms it raises. According to a study from Harvard Business Review, at least 25% of establishments do not conduct any exit interviews with exiting employees. However, as is unfortunately widespread in the world of HR, for those that do perform them they are often inclined to become a box-ticking drill. Many firms don't follow-up on the information gathered and, hence, don't implement the advice given. According to a study from OfficeTeam, a paltry 60% of HR professionals take necessary action after an exit interview. That, added to the number of firms who don't perform exit interviews at all, is a damning and disappointing statistic.

The same Harvard Business Review study also displayed the breakdown of those who carried out exit interviews. One in five exit interviews were carried out by a direct supervisor. This is not advisable policy because, in the majority of cases, departing employees will not speak honestly to a supervisor if that supervisor is a contributory reason to them leaving. For example, over 50% of employees have admitted leaving a job due to their manager at some point in their career, according to research by Gallup.

The Harvard Business Review study also found that 71% of interviews were carried out by a neutral member of the HR department. This would be recommended as it increases the chances of open and honest disclosures from employees. It is entirely understandable that an employee would not confess hard truths to an immediate supervisor or manager. Most people reading this would not either.

### Retention interviews

Despite the importance of exit interviews, you shouldn't wait for them to try keep staff. It would be prudent to utilise retention interviews annually. They measure the degree of engagement and contentment in your company. It highlights issues early and builds trust with employees to reduce the need for exit interviews. They should be an informal chat. Employees should be quizzed on what they like

about their job, but also what more they would desire. Obviously, they must also be questioned on the negatives of their employment. Avoid closed-ended questions. Ask deep questions and search for honest answers.

That said, it should be a laid-back interview, and the employee's effort and loyalty should be recognised. These interviews should make employees feel valued and promote wellbeing. The key focus for 2022 should be staff retention and these interviews are a useful way to improve that as very often exit interviews can be too late.



### Conclusion

Undeniably, there are multiple reasons why exit interviews are of value to a business. It improves a business in countless ways, for instance lowering staff turnover and gathering feedback on employees. Despite the aforementioned positives, they are critically misused globally. Undoubtedly, they are widely used by an array of companies.

A reassuring statistic is that 91% of Fortune 500 companies adopt exit interviews, according to Burke Incorporated. Overall, however, they are carelessly under-utilized. Companies can blame an abundance of reasons for this, but it has to be contended that they are worth it for the benefits reaped in the long-term. The impact of either party being harsh during an exit interview can also be very damaging. Overly positive exit interviews are not particularly useful either as, although reassuring for the employer, it could give them a false sense of security. Despite all that, exit interviews should be previously complimented by retention interviews as that is best practice. Acting early is the optimal way to avoid staff leaving which is key to any HR strategy as we need to ensure we retain our best staff – asking them what is going well, what needs to be improved for them personally and how we can make things better for the employee and the organisation will lead to a win-win for both parties so don't wait for the exit interview to get these important insights when it's too late.



**Caroline Reidy,**  
*Managing Director (& Owner)  
of the HR Suite*

HR and Employment Law Expert, Keynote Speaker, TedX Presenter, Author, Mediator, Adjudicator with the WRC and previous Equality Officer.



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