

EXIT INTERVIEWS

When an employee decides to leave, you might have any number of reactions, depending on the circumstances. One of the positive ones can be to view the parting as a potential opportunity. Conducting an exit interview contributes to that aim by helping you find out about the employee's perspective on his or her experience working for your town. You can gain some valuable insight and ideally be able to make improvements you may not have thought of otherwise. The improvements to work conditions or supervisor's behavior may help other staff members and can lower the likelihood of turnover for future individuals you hire.

It is recommended that such an interview be done in person rather than having the individual respond in writing to a questionnaire. That way you can ask follow-up questions, probe in greater depth, get clarification and take in nonverbal communication as well. If possible, the interview should not be conducted by the supervisor to whom the employee directly reports, as such a situation will likely cause the employee to be less candid. The person who handles human resources is often a natural choice, as would be another unbiased and non-intimidating third party.

Here are some additional tips to help to get the most out of the exit interview:

- Establish the exit interview as a part of the normal process for any departing employee so that it is expected. Include it in an exit checklist (along with returning keys, explaining benefits, final paycheck, etc.) so that it isn't inadvertently omitted.
- Create and use a standard set of questions based upon what you are trying to learn (such as those in the sample below). Try to keep questions open ended as much as possible. Some areas to focus on include the quality of: the recruiting and employee orientation processes, pay, benefits, training, supervision as well as the degree to which the job met the employee's expectations, and why the person is leaving. Although you are using a form, feel free to probe more deeply into other areas that arise.
- Let the person know his/her feedback is valued. Treat every interviewee with respect and courtesy. Set a time and location where you will not be interrupted. Take notes to help you remember the information.
- Display good listening skills, keep an open mind and don't react strongly. Even if the employee says something negative with which you disagree you should not get defensive. Remember that an employee's perception may be shared by others and is therefore important. If unclear, repeat back to the person your understanding of what was said to get clarification and to make sure the person feels heard.
- In order to increase the likelihood of honest answers it is essential to guarantee confidentiality around sensitive issues (such as feelings about a supervisor), as many departing employees will be concerned about "burning bridges." Any trends you discover through aggregate information, or that won't jeopardize confidentiality, can be shared with management.
- Often the most pressing thing you want to find out is the real reason(s) the employee is leaving. Not all such reasons will be within your control (e.g. relocation of the spouse's work), but you should always ask, even if you think you already know the answer. Sometimes there are multiple reasons and contributing factors you may be able to address, so take the time to probe a bit further. The person might have received a better financial offer, but that often isn't the real reason a person leaves. You want to know why he or she was looking in the first place.

Finally, end the interview on a positive note and thank the person for his or her time. Give the person the opportunity to make any further comments. Ask the employee for feedback on the exit interview process in order to improve it.

Once complete, the exit interview will give you as an employer valuable feedback on the position being vacated and your workplace as a whole. It should also leave the departing employee with the sense that he or she was able, even in leaving, to contribute to the betterment of the town or city. It should be a win-win proposition!

- Jill Muhr, VLCT Human Resources Administrator

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