# The Exit Interview

In many organisations, when an employee gives notice, that's the end of communication. However, the departure of an employee can provide you with valuable information. This can be gathered through an exit interview.

The exit interview is a simple conversation between a departing employee (leaving the company either voluntarily or involuntarily) and a representative from the organisation – preferably not an immediate supervisor or work colleague.

The exit interview can follow a structured format or be conducted on an informal basis; written questionnaires can be used in place of a face-to-face meeting. Whichever format is used, exit interviews are generally documented and consistent in their structure.

Exit interviews are a good way for the employee to voice complaints, offer constructive criticism, let off steam, air some gripes, or simply describe why he or she is heading elsewhere.

But the real value of the exit interview is most clearly for the employer, who can use it as a reality check, a trend-spotter, and an informal but significant review to see how the company is doing. It's a good idea to do exit interviews, systematically if possible – every person who departs gets interviewed or completes an exit survey.

The exit interview is especially helpful if there has been a rise in turnover, employee complaints, or possible legal action by former employees.

**When should the interview take place?**
The best time for the interview is not as the employee is literally on the way out the door; a day or two before the employee leaves will still produce good interview information and avoid cramming the interview into a few moments on the last day.

Whenever interviews are scheduled, enough time should be allotted to allow for an in-depth discussion. It's a good idea to systematise the process (just like the selection interview).

Some human resources executives believe that the exit interview is more effective when done a short time after the employee has left because the interval allows the employee to think about the answers free from the pressures of the workplace.

Most employees, at least those who leave voluntarily, will participate in a later interview (perhaps a mailed out survey).

**Where should the interview take place?**
The interview should be conducted in neutral, informal, and pleasant surroundings in order to make the employee feel as comfortable as possible.

A side-by-side seating arrangement, or the use of a conference table, is preferable to a seating arrangement that places the interviewer behind a desk.

The area should be private; the interviewer should make sure that interruptions are kept to a minimum, including not taking incoming telephone calls.

**Who should conduct the interview?**
Generally, immediate supervisors are too close to the situation to be objective in asking questions and recording responses. In fact, the employee's immediate supervisor should not be present at the interview, so the employee will feel more comfortable in speaking honestly.

In order to elicit the most useful information, an outside party should be designated to conduct exit interviews. Here are some basic guidelines for a productive exit interview:

- Prepare for the interview, including evaluating the personnel file, the job description and performance appraisals
- Explain to the departing employee why the interview is being held and emphasise the value of the employee's participation and feedback
- Be an active, unbiased listener
- Refrain from giving opinions or answers that could be construed as opinions, making personal comments, making any promises, or be pushed into defending the company
- Ask neutral questions and avoid questions that might require the employee to criticise a supervisor or co-worker
- Ask open-ended questions that elicit explanations, not one-word answers
- Follow up on responses that need further clarification or elaboration, including inconsistent facts or contradictions
- Be sensitive to the employee's emotional reactions

If you are constructing an exit survey, Leigh Branham (2005) has constructed a list of the 7 most common reasons employees leave. These could give you some good ideas to incorporate into your survey. There may be some other reason, specific to your organisation. For example, if you shifted location, or are committed to do this in, say, 6 months time etc.

1. The job or workplace was not as expected.
2. There is a mismatch between job and person.
3. Too little coaching and feedback.
4. Too few growth and advancement opportunities.
5. Feeling no value and unrecognised.

6. Stress from overwork and work life balance.
7. Loss of trust and confidence in the leaders of the business.

Finally, it is important to track the reason employees leave. Construct a standard "scoring" interview sheet, or periodically compile the statistics from exit surveys.

Another idea I discussed with a valued client this morning – if the employee was profiled, call us to go back through the profile – are there any flags we missed, or were not taken notice of – can we learn anything for future interpretation?

If you want the exit interview to be truly unbiased, AssessSystems can provide a third party interviewer – face-to-face or via telephone. We customise, with your input, a standard process (interview questions, a brief survey and scoring sheet). On completion, a written and/or verbal report can be delivered.

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