
Tool 3 – Exit Interviews and Exit Surveys

This Tool Includes

- Descriptions of exit interviews and surveys (EIS).
- Guidelines on how to use EIS most effectively.
- Descriptions of the advantages and disadvantages of each.
- Sample exit surveys and interview questions.

What Are Exit Interviews and Surveys?

[Exit interviews and exit surveys](#) are two tools organizations often use to gather information about why employees make the decision to leave. As the name implies, exit interviews involve a one-on-one discussion with the departing employee, either in person or by telephone. Exit surveys, on the other hand, consist of asking the departing employee to fill out either an on-line or paper questionnaire.

Each tool has its specific advantages and disadvantages, but both are practical techniques that are relatively easy and inexpensive to use. They can provide you with concrete data to help you design your turnover-reduction strategy. Since the similarities of the tools are greater than their differences, we

will refer to them as the EIS (exit interview/survey) process when we talk about them together.

Guidelines

Candid Feedback

EIS data is useful as a management tool only if the responses provided by departing employees accurately and truthfully reflect the real reasons why they are leaving the agency.

Employees are more likely to give candid feedback when:

- They are provided with assurances that their reasons for leaving are kept confidential and aggregated in summary reports.
- They are offered specific assurances that they will be protected from supervisory retaliation, such as negative references and poor treatment of coworkers who stay behind.
- They believe that the agency has fixed past problems systematically identified in the EIS process.

When Employees Leave

“Indeed, many companies have found little relationship between what employees – particularly departing employees – say motivates their behavior and what actually does. Although the position an employee is leaving for very often does pay better, better pay may or not be the primary reason for moving on. Often, employees say they’re leaving for a higher salary because they think it’s an acceptable reason to give. If they point instead to the way the company is run, they risk antagonizing people whom they may one day need for a reference or a job. A thoughtful employer will want to know not only why the employee took the particular job he did but also which aspects of his current position made him receptive to outside opportunities in the first place.”

Source: Nalbantian and Szostak, 2004.

- They believe the reasons for leaving the agency can be provided in a non-confrontational way (i.e., some employees are unwilling to tell a management representative what they disliked about the agency, but would be willing to provide that information in an anonymous survey, to a neutral third party paid by the agency, or to a human resources department representative).
- Some employees need time to sort out the reasons that brought them to the decision to leave an agency. Sometimes the real reasons may not surface until several weeks after departure. To address that problem, some

agencies conduct an additional exit interview by telephone with a random sample of their former employees.

Organizational Policies

- Agencies should have a formal EIS policy that is uniformly applied. The EIS should be an integral part of the formal “outprocessing” that is expected by all departing employees. Just as employees expect to turn in their keys, identification cards, and laptop, they should understand that the agency values their feedback in the EIS process.
- All employees should understand how important the EIS process is to the agency’s desire to become a better employer. If they understand that their feedback will be taken seriously and see evidence that the agency has made changes based on employee input, they will more likely take the EIS process seriously.
- A properly conducted EIS can provide very valuable information about the reasons why employees leave. However, many agencies simply collect the data, and fail to analyze and use it. EIS data should be shared with senior management for use as an organizational self-assessment and in overall strategic and workforce planning.

- Employees participating in the EIS process must be assured of the confidentiality of their responses, particularly if exit interviews are conducted. Many employees are concerned about “burning their bridges,” knowing that they might seek reemployment in the future. They are also concerned about receiving negative job references, and possible reprisal against friends who still work for the agency.
- Although the EIS process is primarily designed to find out why employees are leaving, it is also an opportune time to learn more about what the employee found satisfying. Many employees leave with totally positive feelings, and agencies need to know what they are doing right so they can keep doing it.
- Keep your perspective. Feedback during the interview and written comments on the survey form can be scathing. Although the comments can signal the alarm for further investigation into mismanagement, supervisory wrongdoing, ethical issues, and the like, it is important not to jump to conclusions. It is also critical that you handle all information consistent with any assurances of confidentiality you provided.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Exit Interviews – Advantages

- Exit interviews are much more personal than the exit survey and provide a setting where the agency can thank departing employees for their contributions and wish them well in their future endeavors.
- The response rate for exit interviews is typically much higher than for the exit survey. Departing employees will usually participate in a face-to-face interview, but put off responding to the survey, and often never return it.
- Exit interviews provide an opportunity to obtain much richer data than the exit survey. An experienced interviewer can ask probing questions and perhaps uncover underlying reasons for the departure that may not surface in a survey.
- The exit interview can provide a therapeutic experience for the departing employee and end the employment relationship on a positive note.

Exit Interviews – Disadvantages

- Exit interviews are relatively expensive to administer. The greatest expense is the salary cost of the person conducting the interview, which includes the cost of

preparing for and conducting the interview and codifying the results in a way that facilitates aggregating the information into usable reports.

- It is difficult to objectively quantify data, particularly when several interviewers are conducting interviews at different locations. Each may place their own interpretation on what they are told, fail to record the data while it is fresh in their mind, and otherwise unintentionally misrepresent the results.
- Even when assurances of anonymity and confidentiality are provided, some departing employees have very little trust in anyone in the agency, including staff from the human resources area. Even when the trust is there, some people simply have a hard time verbalizing their dissatisfaction and prefer to maintain a passive demeanor.
- The exit interview process poses an additional challenge for large agencies with multiple locations. A departing employee may not believe that an interviewer from within their office will be neutral and unbiased; however, sending someone from a central location may be cost prohibitive. Although conducting an exit interview by telephone is an alternative, this will limit the rapport an interviewer may have using a face-to-face interview, thereby defeating one of the primary advantages of the exit interview strategy.

Exit Interviews – Additional Tips

- Someone other than the immediate supervisor or second-level manager should conduct the exit interview. Often the interviewer is from the human resources department, but only if they are regarded as neutral, unbiased and trusted. Although a rather costly alternative, sometimes organizations hire outside consultants to conduct exit interviews.
- Interviewers should be skillful, well trained and good listeners. The interviewer(s) should use a standard format for the interview, but be flexible enough to ask probing questions. Some employees may initially give a superficial reason for leaving (e.g., more advancement opportunities or better pay) and only disclose the more important underlying reasons when probed. The interviewer should set a positive and relaxed tone for the meeting and use active listening skills. When dealing with a negative or critical employee, it is important to avoid the temptation to defend the agency or justify its actions.
- When using the exit interview process, particularly when several interviewers are used in different locations, it is critically important to document the results of the interview in a standard format so that the results can be aggregated into useful reports.

Exit Surveys – Advantages

- Exit surveys are usually less costly to administer than interviews. Once an agency develops the survey instrument, the cost of using it is negligible, including costs of distributing the survey and recording the results. Although the developmental costs may be greater than for a paper-based system, the use of web-based surveys essentially eliminate the cost of survey distribution and recording the results.
- The survey data is easier to objectively quantify than with interviews. The data can be tracked more easily over time, and comparing results across positions, offices, departments, etc. is easier than with exit interviews.
- Exit surveys provide a perception of greater confidentiality and anonymity than exit interviews. Employees may be more candid when they are not sitting across the table from the interviewer.

Exit Surveys – Disadvantages

- Some employees tend to respond to a survey rather superficially, failing to take the time to giving serious thought to their responses. A good interviewer, on the other hand, can probe for responses that cause the employee to reflect more deeply on their answers.
- Typically the response rates for exit surveys is rather low, often well below 50 percent.

Exit Surveys – Additional Tips

- Since the response rate from exit surveys is usually quite low, several techniques can be used to encourage the employee to respond.
 - Your agency can schedule time for the departing employee to meet with an agency representative (perhaps someone from human resources) to turn in keys, ID cards, etc. and also fill out the exit survey. The survey can be completed anonymously and sealed in an envelope to be opened only by the person who compiles results.
 - If the employee takes the survey to be completed at a later time, provide a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

- If the survey is completed online, typically the employee is given a password that provides access to the survey document. Permitting the employee to access the site from home for up to 30 days after departure may be helpful. In that time, you can use email reminders.
- The survey document should have adequate space for written comments, and the instructions should encourage the employee to provide them.

The Best of Both Worlds

Knowing that both exit surveys and exit interviews have their unique advantages and disadvantages, some agencies capitalize on their strengths by using both processes. All employees are given the exit survey at the time of their departure. About three to six months after departure, the agency contacts a random sample of the employees to participate in a telephone survey. Given that many departing employees need to be away from the employment setting for some time before they can determine exactly why they left, this method has the potential of providing very useful data.

Samples

Below are two exit survey examples and some possible exit interview questions taken from the American Public Human Services Association, *Workforce Data Collection Field Guide for Human Services Agencies*.

References

Cyphers, Gary. (2003). *Workforce Data Collection Field Guide for Human Services Agencies*. Washington, DC: American Public Human Services Association.

[www.aphsa.org/Publications/Doc/Workforce%20Data%20Collection%20Field%20Guide%20\(7-30-03\).doc](http://www.aphsa.org/Publications/Doc/Workforce%20Data%20Collection%20Field%20Guide%20(7-30-03).doc)

Nalbantian, Haig R. and Anne Szostak. (2004). *How Fleet Bank Fought Employee Flight*. Harvard Business Review, April.

SAMPLE SURVEY

EIN# _____

Exit Interview Questionnaire

NAME (optional): _____

UNIT: _____ POSITION (classification or working title): _____

SUPERVISOR (optional): _____ LENGTH OF TIME WITH THE AGENCY (optional): _____

1. Will your next job be in a related field?

Yes

No

What is your next job? _____

Who is your next employer? _____

Please rate your satisfaction with the following on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Low 5 = High)

		Low				High
2.	Training	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Quality of supervision	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Utilization of my skills	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Recognition of my achievements	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Cooperative, friendly work environment	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Organizational support	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Overall level of communication	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Communication with co-workers	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Communication with supervisor	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Salary	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Benefits	1	2	3	4	5

13. Why are you leaving the agency?

a. Other employment _____

b. Medical reasons _____

c. Relocation _____

d. Return to school _____

e. Retirement _____

f. Personal _____

Comments: _____

14. Please check each factor that influenced your decision to leave the agency:

a. Salary _____

b. Upper management _____

c. Benefits _____

d. Lack of organizational support _____

e. Advancement opportunities _____

f. Lack of organizational appreciation _____

g. Retirement _____

h. Illness _____

i. Moving _____

j. Work-related stress/burnout _____

k. Hours worked _____

l. Performance appraisals _____

m. Workload _____

n. Client _____

o. Safety factors _____

p. Paperwork _____

q. Training _____

r. Complexity of regulations & policy _____

s. Supervision _____

t. Court-related issues _____

Comments: _____

15. Of the reasons you checked in number 14, please select your top three (by letter):

Reason 1: _____

Reason 2: _____

Reason 3: _____

16. What would have encouraged you to remain with the agency?

17. What part of your job did you enjoy most?

18. What part of your job did you enjoy least?

19. Would you recommend the agency as a potential employer to a friend? Yes No

Comments: _____

Additional comments: _____

Signature of Exiting Employee (optional): _____ Date: (optional) _____

Thank you for your feedback. Please return your completed form to Human Resources. Your comments are kept confidential and aggregated with other responses in summary reports.

**XYZ AGENCY
CHILD WELFARE WORKER
EXIT QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name (Confidential):

County Name:

What was the working title of your position?

(Check all that apply and assign an approximate percentage of time.)

- Foster Care Worker
- Children's Protective Services Worker
- Delinquency/Juvenile Justice Worker
- Adoption Worker
- Prevention Worker
- Adult Services Worker
- Other (Please Specify)

1. How long did you work in this position?

How long did you work for the agency?

- 0-1 years
- 1-2 years
- 2-3 years
- 3-4 years
- 4+ years

- 0-1 years
- 1-2 years
- 2-3 years
- 3-4 years
- 4+ years

2. Did you leave to take another job? Yes _____ No _____ (check one)

If yes, what is your new position? _____

What is the name of your new employer? _____

3. Please check each factor below that influenced your decision to leave your former position:

- a. _____ Court (judges, investigators, administrators, referees)
- b. _____ Attorneys
- c. _____ Collateral support personnel (psychologists, psychiatrists, medical, counselors)
- d. _____ Bureaucracy (paperwork and/or record keeping)
- e. _____ Red Tape (complex rules and policy)
- f. _____ Clients/Customers (Parents, Foster Parents, Youth, Children & other Adults)
- g. _____ Caseload size
- h. _____ Hours worked
- i. _____ Other agencies (cooperation, contact, etc.)
- j. _____ Supervision
- k. _____ Safety factors
- l. _____ Salary
- m. _____ Advancement
- n. _____ Training
- o. _____ Performance appraisals
- p. _____ Benefits (insurance, pension, 401(k), etc.)
- q. _____ Work-related injury
- r. _____ Work-related illness
- s. _____ Work-related stress
- t. _____ Retirement
- u. _____ Moving
- v. _____ Other (please explain)

4. Of the factors you checked in question 3, please select your top three choices (a, b, c, etc.):

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Please explain how these factors influenced your decision to leave your position.

Possible Questions for a Staff Exit Interview

In addition to the standard set of questions agencies have regarding compensation, benefits, and working conditions, here are some possibilities from which to select those that work for you:

- What did you enjoy most about working with us?
- What frustrations did you feel in your position? Why?
- What will you miss most about working here?
- What could we do to make your replacement's tenure with us more satisfying?
- What are the three (or more) most important changes you would recommend for your department/this organization to make it better?
- Would you recommend our agency to friends or relatives looking for a job? Why or why not?
- The extent to which supervision:
 - Provided recognition on the job
 - Developed cooperation and teamwork
 - Encouraged and listened to suggestions
 - Resolved complaints and problems
 - Followed policies and practices
 - Met my needs for coaching and mentoring
 - Provided helpful feedback and performance evaluations

Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, authors of the best selling book *First Break All the Rules (What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently)*, identify 12 questions that best measure the strength of any workplace. They measure the core elements needed to attract, focus, and keep the most talented employees. Adaptations of some of these questions could be helpful to ask departing employees in order to assess where core elements can improve.

1. Did you know what was expected of you at work?
2. Did you have the materials and equipment to do what you did best every day?
3. At work, did you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?
4. In a typical week, did you receive recognition or praise for doing good work?
5. Did your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?

6. Was there someone at work who encouraged your development?
7. At work, did your opinions seem to count?
8. Did the mission/purpose of your agency make you feel your job was important?
9. Were your co-workers committed to doing quality work?
10. Did you have a best friend at work?
11. In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?
12. This last year, have you had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

Source: *Cyphers*, page 21.