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# Exit Interviews and Exit Surveys - Guidelines

## 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.

## 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.

### 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 that the agency has fixed past problems systematically identified in the EIS process.
- 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.

## References

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