Exit Interview



Exit interviews offer a final opportunity to gather objective insights into what your employees think is right and wrong about your organization. Handled correctly, these interviews will help you identify and resolve workplace problems, minimize resentment and misunderstanding when employees leave, and boost employee retention in the future.

HR professionals generally recognize that exit interviews-whether conducted in a voluntary or involuntary termination situation-can generate a wealth of useful information about an organization's working environment. The interviews also help tie up loose ends with departing employees (such as obtaining a correct mailing address for W-2 forms, reinforcing confidentiality agreements, and retrieving company property) and, in some cases, may head off the unpleasant repercussions that can arise from a bitter dismissal situation. The interview is a final opportunity to address misunderstandings and defuse potential legal actions.

The exit interview formula is actually pretty straightforward, with a shorter list of do's and don'ts than many HR practices. To help you get a handle on how to take advantage of exit interviews in your organization, here are some guidelines.

INTERVIEW OVERVIEW

First, it's important to understand exactly what an exit interview is-and what it isn't. Typically, exit interviews are conducted a day or two before an employee's separation date and are designed to:

- **Identify** the reason the employee is leaving the organization, if the termination is voluntary.
- **Reiterate** the reason for dismissal, if the termination is involuntary, in order to identify any areas of misunderstanding.
- **Explain** any conversion or continuation of benefits.
- **Verify** the employee's address for the mailing of Internal Revenue Service Form W-2 (and obtain the address for any spouse, former spouse, or dependents who may be eligible to continue health care benefits under the organization's health insurance plan).
- **Determine** the employee's availability for future employment, if appropriate.

- **Explain** the organization’s policy on providing references.
- **Review** the employee’s obligations regarding non-competition and confidentiality agreements.
- **Discuss** the return of any employer property.

To accomplish these goals, the interview should be conducted by a neutral party, such as a member of your HR or personnel department or another member of upper management. In any case, the interviewer should be skilled at eliciting and analyzing responses and should be prepared with facts about the employee’s personnel history and the responsibilities associated with the position.

Many experts believe that the employee’s supervisor should not be present during an exit interview, since that might inhibit the conversation. The goal is to create an atmosphere that encourages employees to share their honest views about the company, its management practices, and any specific details relating to their job.

WHAT SHOULD YOU ASK THE EMPLOYEE?

Effective exit interviews are structured to ensure that all the important issues are covered, and they typically include both specific and open-ended questions. This format enables the interviewer to collect job-related details along with more general feedback and opinions. The questions you include will vary depending on the type of information you need. However, exit interviews usually include certain standard lines of questioning (with appropriate follow-up questions based on the employee’s responses). For example:

- Why are you leaving? (if the termination is voluntary)
- Are there any changes or improvements that would have prevented you from leaving? (again, if the termination is voluntary)
- What did you like most about working for this organization?
- What did you like least about working for this organization?
- How would you evaluate the performance of your supervisor?
- Did you feel the organization provided you with sufficient training, opportunities for advancement, benefits, etc.?
- Do you have any suggestions for ways the organization or your department might make work more pleasant and productive?

Finally, if any ill feelings or misunderstandings about the employer’s policies are uncovered, then the interviewer can attempt to defuse the issues or adjust any wrong actions.

HOW SHOULD YOU USE THE INFORMATION?

To benefit from the insights a separating employee provides, you need to make sure you do several things:

- Keep track of the information so you can analyze any trends, such as high turnover in certain departments, recurring references to a lack of advancement opportunities, or repeated mentions of problems with a specific individual.
- Communicate employee feedback to those who can use the information to analyze and correct any problems in your organization.
- Follow up on any information you obtain that points to inappropriate or

unacceptable behavior, such as allegations of harassment, discrimination, or poor management.

THE EXIT INTERVIEW ADVANTAGE

Information you obtain from employees during exit interviews can provide you with significant resources for shaping company policies and troubleshooting problems in the work environment. The interview process, when properly structured and consistently handled, also provides a final opportunity to identify misunderstandings and potential legal problems. A creditable and sympathetic interviewer can elicit valuable information and frame the employer’s position in the best possible light.