

Exit Interviews – Evidence Review

As early as 1944 Onarheim (Onarheim, 1944) argued that the exit interview saves desirable employees, enables the company to check constantly on its employment, placement, training, wage, and other policies, discovers reasons for excessive quits in individual departments and checks the effectiveness of grievance handling procedures.

Habbe (Habbe, 1952) described how exit interviews can use a non-directive technique to talk out problems, uncover misunderstandings, obtain data to check on the soundness of initial selection, and obtain useful suggestions for improving communications and operations.

This (This, 1955) described how exit interviews could avoid slip-ups in de-clearance of personnel, help spot faulty administration, poor personnel policies and practices, and unsatisfactory supervisors.

Lefkowitz (Lefkowitz & Katz, 1969) compared reasons for termination given during exit interviews and from post-termination questionnaires. His results confirmed “the questionable accuracy of exit interview data and the tendency to get non-committal or distorted reports.” He recommended interviewer training and the use of a post-termination questionnaire.

Hinrichs (Hinrichs, 1975) compared information given during exit interviews conducted by company management, follow-up questionnaires sent by the HR department and exit interviews by an outside consultant. He found that more negative information was generated through the consultant interviews and concluded that “results suggest distortion to exit interview data collected by company management.”

Embrey (Embrey, Mondy, & Noe, 1979) argued that “a patterned exit interview permits the employee to tell the termination story ... openly and freely within the parameters defined by the interviewer.”

Weisman (Weisman, Alexander, & Chase, 1981) concluded that “causal inferences based on exit interview data alone are overly simplistic and misleading for management purposes.”

Garretson (Garretson & Teel, 1982) found that most exit interviews were conducted by HR staff during an employee’s last week; that organisations fail to make any use of the information obtained and that little effort is made to work out turnover costs. Garretson recommended that companies conducting exit interviews either use the information obtained as a basis for identifying and alleviating problems or stop conducting them.

Drost (Drost, O'Brien, & Marsh, 1987) argued that establishing good rapport between interviewer and interviewee would lead to more candid responses and that assurances should be given that no retaliatory action will be taken because of the responses received.

Giacalone (Giacalone, 1989) argued that interviewees distort their responses in order to make them acceptable as ordinary, publicly-known pieces of information. “Consequently, the information that is sought in the exit interview process should be kept within informational limits that avoid discussion of sensitive areas. “Although this will reduce the quantity of information, it will enhance its quality.”

Knouse (Knouse & Giacalone, 1992) used role play to investigate the willingness of employees to discuss certain issues. He found that more positive feelings towards the interviewer yielded

greater willingness to discuss issues. “The greatest willingness to discuss was evident when there was a positive feeling toward the company and the interviewer.”

Wilkinson (Wilkinson, 1992) reported that “the hierarchical level of the exit interviewer could have a significant effect on the amount and accuracy of the data.”

Grensing-Pophal (Grensing-Pophal, 1993) recommended that managers should: know what information is desired from the meeting; have a plan of action; be organised; and ask only necessary questions. “The manager should also realise that even information provided from an overly emotional, bitter employee may help future employee relations.”

Fottler (Fottler, Crawford, Quintana, & White, 1995) compared the relative effectiveness of an attitude survey and exit interviews. Fottler concluded that attitude surveys generated more, and better quality, data.

Giacalone (Giacalone, Stuckey, & Beard, 1996) studied the conditions affecting biased responses in exit interviews. He identified seven distinct categories of factors leading to distortions.

Knouse (Knouse, Beard, Pollard, & Giacalone, 1996) studied 59 employed MBA students. He found that those with positive attitudes to their superior and their organisation were more willing to discuss issues considered important by the management whereas those with positive attitudes to their supervisors but negative attitudes towards authority were more willing to discuss issues like training effectiveness, company rules, geographic location, unwillingness to relocate, and desire for different work.

Brotherton (Brotherton, 1996) recommended that interviewers should be as objective as possible but steer clear of questions that could embarrass or offend the employee; that probe into the employee’s personal life; or that require the employee to respond in a way that criticises a co-worker or manager.

Kennedy (Kennedy, 1996) argued that exit interviews can show where situations are worsening before this becomes clear through official channels and reveal a developing pattern of departures before statistics are tabulated.

Giacalone (Giacalone, Knouse, & Montagliani, 1997) identified three factors that could lead to honest responding: positive equity; capricious reasons and negative equity. Three factors that could prevent honest responding were: negative consequences; personal and situational reasons; and objectivity.

Feldman (Feldman & Klaas, 1999) found that people were more likely to self-disclose their reasons for departure when data was treated confidentially and fed back in aggregate form; when employees were protected from supervisor retaliation in the form of negative recommendations and when organisations had previously fixed problems systematically raised in exit interviews.

Jurkiewicz (Jurkiewicz, Knouse, & Giacalone, 2001) studied the effectiveness of clinician exit interviews and surveys.

Garrett (Garrett, 2003) set out a number of tips including: publicise it; target all leavers; try to keep them; choose a neutral; set rules of engagement; keep it structured; what are they leaving for?; listen, don’t react; act on the data

Frase-Blunt (Frase-Blunt, 2004) argued that “to encourage more employees to participate in an exit interview employers should stress the confidentiality of the discussions. The interviewer needn’t necessarily be an HR professional.”

Jackson (Jackson, 2004) argued that most of the time employers forget to link the information gathered in an exit interview back to the organisation’s operations.

HR expert Jo Bond (Couzins, 2005) recommended that all feedback from exit interviews should be objectively reviewed and put into proper context with the best way of doing this being to gather the information into an annual or bi-annual report. Interviews should never be delegated to “a junior, unprepared, or inexperienced member of the team.” Those carrying out the interview should be objective, prepared and show their appreciation.

Beagrie (Beagrie, 2005) recommended making people feel comfortable and relaxed with a few general questions about their roles and responsibilities before moving on to more revealing ones, such as overall job satisfaction and their reasons for leaving.

Gurchiek (Gurchiek, 2007) reported on a survey of 150 senior executives at the US’ 1,000 largest companies. 19% always acted on information from exit interviews and 57% did so ‘somewhat frequently.’

Klein (Klein, 2007) argued that interview data should be aggregated to protect anonymity and identify recurring themes.

Williams (Williams, Harris, & Parker, 2008) studied exit interviews in the hotel industry concluding “our findings raise questions regarding the effectiveness of information provided by the exit interview processes.”

June (June, 2009) found that response honesty was greater when there were positive characteristics associated with the exit interview process (e.g. when the employee knows their information will be kept confidential; when the company reacts constructively to feedback; or when the employee believes they will receive fair employment references). “Findings indicate that exit interviews may only reflect true separation intentions under certain circumstances.”

Gioia (Gioia & Catalano, 2011) found that exit interviews conducted by HR professionals from outside the organisation helped a bank to dramatically reduce turnover rates and implement strategies to recruit and retain the right people.

Carvin (Carvin, 2011) argued that while 95% of companies conduct exit interviews they have a reputation for failing to produce useful information. In one survey 53% said they were ‘very likely,’ to be honest, compared to only 22% in a survey of existing employees. “Exit interviews should be conducted between three days before and three days after the employee’s termination date.”

DiFlorio (DiFlorio, 2012) argued that ignoring information from exit interviews could lead to: inability to identify causes of turnover; no road map for developing retention programmes; lost opportunities to avert litigation; inability to gather competitive intelligence; unnecessary costs for recruiting and training.

A 2014 Cochrane review (Webster & Flint, 2014) concluded “evidence about the effectiveness of exit interviews to reduce turnover is currently not available. However, exit interviews may

provide useful information about the work environment which, in turn, may be useful in the development of interventions to reduce turnover.”

Potton (Potton, 2015) advised “to get honest responses you need to create a rapport early on, so it feels like a discussion, not an interrogation. But in the nicest possible way you have to be tough when probing for reasons and ask direct questions.”

Turner (Turner, Lee-Shrewsbury, & Hill, 2016) developed a peer-on-peer, time-restricted, anonymous, semi-structured interview process which was delivered by junior doctors to one another. All the respondents found having an exit interview ‘useful,’ or ‘very useful.’

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