



TIME TO SAY GOODBYE

**Reproduced from Human Resources magazine with the permission of the copyright owner, Haymarket Business Publications Limited.*

"An exit interview should not only get to the bottom of why valued staff are leaving, but form the basis of an action plan to stop them wanting to leave in the first place."

When you consider that people spend an estimated 75 percent of every waking hour in work-related activity, it's not hard to see that ending the relationship between employer and employee is a big step.

Regardless of whether someone 'lives to work' or 'works to live,' they lay their aspirations at the door of the organization they decide to join, hoping these will become a reality. When the time comes to leave, the extent to which the organization has encouraged them to realize these expectations is brought into sharp focus. How an employer handles the exit interview can have a lasting impact on the employee's perceptions of the company. A sensitively-managed exit can ensure that their alumni become brand ambassadors who will speak highly of their former employer when asked: 'So, what were they really like to work for?'

Perhaps even more important, the final interview also provides the opportunity for an employer to understand why valued members of staff leave and what can be done to prevent it happening in the future.

MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

Traditional exit interviews often focus on issues such as compensation, benefits and working conditions. While these are important to most employees, they are not usually critical factors in their decision to leave or stay. More often, the issues that really count include an employee's relationship with their

manager, a belief that the company has a strong future and personal alignment with its mission and values. If these factors are in place, staff are often more willing to accept limited areas of dissatisfaction.

High-performing organizations know that to sustain their leading market position, they must continue to develop a work environment that attracts and retains the very best people and fosters their growth and commitment. They can only achieve this by measuring attitudes and behaviors, establishing benchmarks and monitoring progress—the factors that drive results. When designing an exit interview, the focus should be on behavioral matters that organizations can easily turn into action plans to reduce turnover and increase engagement.

BE CONSISTENT

While many employers do carry out exit assessments, different departments may use a variety of approaches and this can dilute the impact. As a result, departing workers can have radically different leaving experiences or even be overlooked in the short period between resignation and heading out the door. It will also be difficult for the organization to compare the data these different methods produce and come up with an effective action plan to resolve the issues identified.

It certainly helps if a senior member of staff takes responsibility for gaining commitment to a unified approach. There are a number of benefits of an organization-wide exit interview process. All regretted departures are managed swiftly and consistently, and there is agreement about the specific areas that are important for the business to explore. Also it guarantees sufficient response rates to allow the organization to identify best practice and improvement opportunities,

and makes it possible to compare data between the exit interview and other organizational assessments, such as employee opinion surveys, to design strategies that improve the work environment and retention. The process can be aligned to other business critical and strategic HR initiatives, too.

When one approach has been agreed upon, it is good practice to put that policy in writing. That way, individuals know that there is an exit interview process in place and they can read up on precisely how it is expected to operate.

WHO CONDUCTS THE INTERVIEW?

Interviewing of this nature should only be done by experienced researchers, who know about the issues that may arise. Exit interviews are often the responsibility of experienced HR professionals, in order to encourage a frank exchange between a 'neutral' representative and the departing employee. But however trusted the HR department may be, staff often fear repercussions if the information they reveal were to get into the wrong hands. Consequently, to avoid 'burning bridges,' they may give the most generic of answers. The two most frequently cited reasons for leaving are a better pay and benefits package or a better opportunity.

Many organizations get an independent third party to conduct all the exit interviews because of such concerns about confidentiality. But even with a third party, you have to make every effort to reassure all employees taking part that their comments or ratings will not be attributed. Regardless of who conducts the exit interview, however, employee participation should always be voluntary.

BELT AND BRACES

It is best to conduct two exit assessments. The first is often a web or paper survey, administered during the last week of the individual's employment or sent to them at home if the departure was immediate. The second is a follow-up assessment over the phone, four to six weeks later. The initial assessment is done because it is often difficult to contact and persuade leavers to participate later. At the very least, it provides an opportunity to obtain their feedback.

The follow-up assessment may reveal a more objective explanation for leaving. The people who have left should by now have experienced a new organization and may actually realize that 'the grass is not always greener.' The passage of time often results in more open feedback on why employees left. This increases the reliability and validity of the information.

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

Having spent considerable time and energy collecting exit data, it is crucial to put the insight gained to good use. For this to happen, several key people within the business need to receive regular feedback from the exit analysis: recruiters for re-hiring talented former employees who want to return—information could be transmitted daily or weekly; first-line managers so they can take pre-emptive action to retain those who have not yet left, but whose attitude shows that they are thinking about leaving; and a strategy group responsible for formulating policy regarding retention.

Transmitting regular pulses of information will keep retention as a top priority with those who can influence it. The results of Kenexa research found that most people think about leaving for up to six months before they actually make the decision to hand in their notice. This suggests that there may be time for managers or others to detect behavioral signs about intentions to leave, well before the decision is actually made. Some responses will inevitably indicate that nothing could have been done to keep the leaver, while others may simply want help in developing a career path within their current organization.

One way of improving retention rates would be to ask managers to identify their highest-performing team members. As part of their own performance objectives, these managers could then be asked to achieve a target retention rate for this group. Knowing that they will be held accountable for the retention of these high-performers in the longer term can have a powerful impact on managers' behavior. ■

www.kenexa.com
contactus@kenexa.com