

Using Exit Interviews as a Tool for Talent Retention

By Richard Harding, Ph.D., Kenexa

Many people who have left a significant job have found their last week and last day to be chaotic, fast-paced and even emotional. The last day can be spent handing in keys, checking in equipment, clearing desks and offices, signing separation and financial documents, saying good-byes and even completing an exit interview or survey.

Under these conditions, trying to summarize your work experience may be difficult as you try to answer the exit interview questions. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that this may be a poor time to complete an exit interview, especially if the organization wants valid answers. Many organizations do the exit interview at the time of departure because the person is available to be interviewed. After departure, it is more difficult to get the individual to respond. The tradeoff for organizations is that some information is better than none, even if the information is of dubious quality.

Kenexa suggests the exit interview or survey process be completed between two weeks and one full year after departure. This allows respondents time to put their experiences in perspective and take some of the emotionality out of their responses. At the time of departure, many individuals respond that they are leaving for two reasons: better opportunity and/or higher salary. These are the convenient reasons that no one will ever question. By letting some time pass, people are usually more open to give further detail around their reasons for departure, which increases the reliability and validity of the information and makes it more useful to the organization.

Most organizations have the intention when conducting an exit process to determine why people are leaving. This is an appropriate goal, but Kenexa suggests adding an exit process goal of finding out why people stay with the organization and using the information in developing action strategies for managers

to increase retention of productive people. This suggests the organization should be very discriminatory in who it asks to complete an exit interview or survey, especially when resources are limited. Kenexa recommends that only people who are leaving voluntarily, people who are eligible for rehire or people who were very productive be given the exit interview. Instead of conducting an exit process with everyone, spend these resources obtaining information from people who you would really have liked to keep. Then use the data to find out how to retain the most productive associate—the one you would really like to stay.

The next function that can be served by an exit process is to turn it into a re-recruiting tool. By allowing time to pass between departure and the exit interview, some exited associates will find the “grass is not really greener” and would entertain the idea of returning (another good reason to only exit interview people you want to return) to the organization. The question that is asked is, “Under what conditions would you think about returning to XYZ organization?” If the answer is positive, the follow up question is, “Would you like someone to contact you about returning?” One organization has found that about two-thirds of its exited employees said they would like to return as long as they could work for a different manager. This opens up a large pool of candidates who know the culture, have some training and will be the most cost effective people to hire. They will require less training and time between rehire, and be a productive contributor to the organization.

To turn this process into a tool that will allow managers to develop retention strategies, another process must be added. One or both of the following could be completed. The first is conducting an employee attitude or engagement survey with the entire employee population.

Many of the concepts measured in the engagement survey could be turned into parallel questions in the exit process. Utilizing more parallel concepts between the exit interview and the survey will result in more comparisons that can be drawn between exited people and the existing employee base. From the parallel questions and analysis of the exit data, a model of exited people can be derived and then the model can be applied to the engagement survey group. One client who did this found that 35 percent of their existing employee population was very similar in attitude to the exited sample. A retention index was derived yielding a departure potential score for each work group. This retention index was composed of behaviors that managers needed to pay attention to in order to retain productive employees. This allows managers to develop retention strategies around keeping the key employees, or most productive associates in the organization.

Another technique in lieu of, or in conjunction with, an engagement survey would be to identify a large sample of the most productive employees across the organization. This productive group would be given the exit interview—with verb tenses changed of course—and compared to the model of exited associates. Once again, this would allow a Retention Index to be developed with accompanying action plans.

Kenexa Exit Interviews™ can be delivered to clients in many ways, using a combination of these methodologies. One delivery method is through an outbound telephone call. The Kenexa Exit Interviewing specialist places the call from the Kenexa phone management system. This system uses a five call format, that is, the first call is placed on a weekday evening (not Friday), with the second and third calls on other weekday evenings. The fourth call is placed during the week with the fifth call being on a weekend early afternoon. Kenexa has found that the best days for completion are Tuesdays, followed by Wednesday, then Monday and Thursday. It takes, on average, 2.5 calls to obtain one completed exit interview. When the specialist connects with a person, the completion rate is 91 percent, with only nine percent declining to be interviewed. The interview is configured to be no more than 10 to 15 minutes in length. When completing the exit interview, many people comment that they wish the company had asked them these questions during their employment.

Other ways the exit process can be completed are through an online survey, touch-tone phone, interactive voice response, and paper and pencil. Kenexa will work with the client to determine the best and most efficient way, or combination of ways, to conduct the exit process. Completion rates will vary with each methodology.

The exit interview process can be a valuable tool for managers and human resource professionals as they develop ways to retain the most productive associates of the organization. ■

About the Author

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Richard E. Harding, Ph.D., is an executive consultant, director of research and principal at Kenexa. Dr. Harding has more than 24 years of experience specializing in validity and reliability of assessments, selection and development of associates, associate surveys, multi-rater surveys, and business outcomes modeling and linkages. He has consulted with numerous Fortune 500 companies in the United States and Europe. Before joining Kenexa, Harding was director of research for The Gallup Organization for almost 17 years. He also taught science and mathematics at the secondary school level, is an adjunct professor for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and has taught numerous research and statistics classes at the graduate and undergraduate level. Dr. Harding is the author of over 300 proprietary validity studies and has offered affidavit support and testimony for clients in legal venues.

Dr. Harding is a licensed psychologist, and a member of the American Psychological Association, American Educational Research Association, National Council on Measurement in Education, Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychologists and Sigma Xi Research Society. He holds a Doctorate degree in psychological and cultural studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with an emphasis in statistics, research and program evaluation.

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