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### Exit Interviews: Not The Final Word Meetings Useful For Employee, Employer

by KELLY JOSEPHSEN, Pantagraph business writer

When a romantic relationship ends, the jilted party has the right to ask one simple question — “Why?”

While the relationship between employer and employee is not as intense, the breakup between the two deserves some sort of explanation as well. Enter the exit interview—a process meant to make the situation less awkward for both parties while providing valuable feedback from departing workers.

OfficeTeam, a Menlo, Calif.-based firm that specializes in administrative staffing, recently conducted a national study to determine how businesses react to information obtained from exit interviews. Company spokeswoman Michelle Reisdorf said two-thirds of executives surveyed said they frequently act on feedback from exit interviews, while only 1 percent said they never use the information. The study's conclusion was that exit interviews lead to policy alterations about 75 percent of the time. “Everything that comes up in an exit interview might not be changed, but I definitely think there are certain aspects they will pull out so they can attempt to make even small changes,” said Reisdorf.

Rick Galbreath, president of Bloomington-based Human Resources Growth Partners Inc., has done extensive employee retention consulting during his 20 year career and has found exit interviews to be one of the most useful devices employers have at their disposal.

“I think they're one of the most fabulous, but often overlooked, tools for businesses to get an inside look at what's going on in their organizations,” he said. And more employers are using them.

Reisdorf said about half of the firms she works with use exit interviews, but the number is growing rapidly, probably because of intense competition for good employees in today's marketplace.

Because it can cost an employer thousands of dollars to hire and train a new worker, she said, more companies are addressing the factors that create job satisfaction. As she puts it, "If somebody's leaving to go somewhere else, it's because that somewhere else is offering them something better."

At the same time, if exit interviews are properly constructed and well conducted, Galbreath noted, the information can allow employers to correct problems that already exist at their companies—often ones they aren't aware of—that can help retain valuable workers. "When properly done, you can determine where people are going once they leave your organization and, most importantly, why," he said.

Reisdorf agreed, noting that serious problems— even harassment or discrimination—can come to light during an exit interview. More often, an exit interview will be the final time an employee feels comfortable in giving an honest opinion about an employer. According to Reisdorf, if there is an environment of fear at a company, no one is likely to speak up while they are employed. Once they decide to leave, however, an exit interview can be a good way of finding out what people really think.

But that's not always easy.

Galbreath and Reisdorf said several things must be kept in mind for an exit interview to be effective.

First, Galbreath said it's important to conduct the interview in a way that allows the interviewer to glean information that leads to an understanding of the "unspoken culture" of the business. While this might not always be "polite" information, Galbreath noted, it is valuable because it gives the employer an inside look at what is good and bad about the company.

The main thing employers must keep in mind is that the process should be taken seriously. "If they really don't want to hear the answers, they would save everyone time and trouble by not going through the process," said Galbreath. The departing employee should be told that open and honest discussion is a priority and that he or she will be listened to, Galbreath said.

Reisdorf also said it might be a good idea to have a third party—perhaps a consultant like Galbreath—conduct the interview, because an employee might not feel comfortable voicing concerns to someone with the company.

She also said the interview should not be informal—the interviewer shouldn't just stop by an employee's desk and ask a few questions. "Instead, take them into a separate room and show you really want to listen and hear what the improvements should be," she advised.

There also are a few things that employees should keep in mind.

While being honest is paramount, Reisdorf said, the departing worker must be professional in giving feedback—don't burn bridges, she cautioned.

"Don't go over the edge and say something you regret," Reisdorf said. "You shouldn't be gossiping and giving information about other people, just the concerns you have and why you left the position."

According to Galbreath, after a good exit interview—which should take an hour or longer—the former employee should feel like his or her information and opinions have been heard, should know the employer cares and believe something will be done with their suggestions.

"It provides the employee with a lasting positive view of the company they're leaving, and that provides a springboard for that employee to come back," Galbreath noted.

Along the same lines, he said the first question in any exit interview should be: "Are there things we can do today that would change your mind from leaving?" If the employee says yes, there might be room to keep a valuable worker. However, if the answer is no, Galbreath suggests moving on to topics like the reasons why the employee started to look for another job and factors in the workplace that were enjoyable or of concern.

It also is a good idea to ask company-specific questions about the quality of the workplace and its management, he added.

In general, Reisdorf said, the interviewer should find out what could have been done to make the employee more satisfied—perhaps training was inadequate, a manager didn't do enough to help workers succeed, office morale was poor, or the workload was too heavy or too light.

Once an exit interview is over, another key component comes into play—correctly interpreting the results. Instead of simply looking at a problem mentioned by a single ex-employee, Galbreath said, interviewers should look for trends— good or bad.

Often, he said, this can involve what former employees think about management, how people feel they have been treated and whether salary levels are adequate. Reisdorf also advises that companies look beyond their borders to see where they stack up against competing employers.

By looking for trends, Galbreath added, employers also avoid taking to heart information given by employees who have a hidden agenda.

In that situation, Reisdorf advises re-examining the information closely after the interview is conducted. By considering the departing employee's work history, she said, an employer has a good chance of determining if the person's concerns are valid or simply sour grapes.

However, if the allegations are "very disturbing," she said they should be researched no matter what. In the case of an employee who might have an ax to grind, she said the interviewer should talk with other people in that worker's department.

Although there are pitfalls, analysis of exit interviews also can help an employer decide who to hire in the future.

For example, Galbreath said a company might hear numerous exit interview complaints about how it is too fast-paced. If that is a necessary aspect of the business, he explained, the employer might want to spend more time on the subject with prospective employees.

The final step in successfully using an exit interview is implementing change. Galbreath said organizations can't always do something about how much they pay employees, but that is rarely the only factor forcing a person to leave a company. That's why businesses can use exit interview information to work on cultural problems that contribute to employees resigning — work conditions, morale, benefits.

Whether a company uses the information often depends on the size of the organization and the sophistication of its management, Galbreath said. In his experience, Fortune 500 companies and employers with work forces of more than 500 people often implement a lot of changes thanks to the recommendations of exiting employees.

"The greatest majority of those companies pay attention because they've learned over the years that it pays great dividends to do so," Galbreath said.

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