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Getting the Last Word

Interview by Terence F. Shea

Beth N. Carvin advises clients on the employment process—from hiring and mentoring to finding out why employees leave. She is president and chief executive officer of Honolulu-based Nobscot Corp., developer of automated exit interview, recruiting and employee survey systems. Carvin says parting words, whether elicited through automated means or otherwise, "uncover strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats," and perhaps minimize turnover.

Can exit interviews reveal anything beyond the reasons people give for leaving?

When they're done well, they're useful HR tools for:

- Discovering sexual harassment, workplace violence, discrimination and other issues while they are still solvable—before anyone sues.
- Generating ideas for improving procedures.
- Identifying managers and colleagues who deserve recognition, learning what programs are highly valued, and determining if positions need to be re-graded.
- Measuring diversity. Analyzing interview data by gender, race and age can help determine if any minority or protected class is having unfavorable workplace experiences.

Can't those findings be drawn from surveys?

You should be seeking ways to get feedback with current employees. In exit interviews, you can get more honest and focused data that can be acted upon—or not—in your own time frame. Employee surveys are great, but people are more cautious in how much they will reveal, and they can only hypothesize on what would cause them to leave.

When should an exit interview be conducted—on the employee's last day? Or later?

Around the last day worked. There is lingering talk about the oldfad of doing "post-exit interviews" several months after the termination date. The idea is that after time has passed, the former employee can look at the employment experience more objectively and provide good, solid, less-emotional feedback.

But post-exit interviews have been a bust. Participation rates are low. It's hard to reach people three to six months later, and former employees don't care enough to participate. Whatever drove them to leave is water under the bridge.

You want to hear from employees while they are emotional—and will tell you things that need to be fixed.

Who should see and analyze exit interviews? HR? Outside experts?

Generally, HR professionals. They are trained in confidentiality and are experienced with hearing employees' side of the story without getting upset or jumping to conclusions. Interpreting exit interviews is an art and a science. It requires a good understanding of people and human behavior, and solid experience

with workplace dynamics. It takes an analytical mind to identify trends and follow the logical path to where the data take them. I don't recommend having other kinds of professionals review individual interviews.

Is it worthwhile to evaluate groups of exit interviews and look for patterns in employee comments?

Absolutely. Within each organization, different irritations impact different groups of employees. If you look at your data only from an overall company standpoint, it's easy to mistakenly think that what's affecting one group is affecting everyone. This can lead to unnecessary costly changes or, worse, introduction of irritations that didn't previously exist.

You can get interesting and actionable information when you look at data by departments, divisions and job functions and by demographics such as length of service and performance ratings. As you can imagine, irritations affecting new employees are different from irritations affecting your long-service employees.

Some companies break data down into toosmall levels, producing data from only one or two interviews per cost center. At that level, the information is really just anecdotal.

How can employees be motivated to tell the whole truth in exit interviews?

Create a corporate culture around listening to employee suggestions, acting on ideas, being nonjudgmental, welcoming critiques, and solving problems identified by employees and former employees.

Interestingly, in a face-to-face setting, the departing employee may not be forthcoming. This is really hard for those of us in HR to grasp. We want to believe in the personal touch. Truth is, for most employees, it's really hard to say "my boss is a jerk" or even to share a really good suggestion for improving a process.

While a small percentage of gregarious employees may do great in in-person exit interviews, for most people—and definitely for introverted people—it's really difficult. So they stick with the "everything was fine, I got a better opportunity" line.

Telephone exit interviews add distance and can increase honesty. Unfortunately, because of caller ID, it can be hard to reach people by telephone.

Technology—as simple as an e-mail form or as robust as an exit interview management system—is the ultimate distance creator. For whatever reasons, when you put someone in front of a computer, they begin to tell all.

Moreover, anonymity is not critical in getting honest responses. Only about 35 percent of employees—when given the choice—choose to be anonymous. This tells us that employees want to provide their organizations with feedback, and they want credit for providing that information.

The interviewer is associate editor of HR Magazine.