

No way to go out

Why employees hate exit interviews so much

by Bob Rodgers

A few years ago, the popular satirical newspaper *The Onion* wrote a story about an exit interview for a longtime employee at a company with an Atlanta office. The employee rehashes his experience: how he was unsure if he'd be receiving a positive referral, how it was the first time he met his human resource manager in more than a decade working there, and how the highlight was seeing his permanent employee file – which included a photo from a company picnic years ago that was clipped from the monthly newsletter.

In typical *Onion* fashion, it's a clever, funny read that pokes fun at the corporate process. And in this case, I believe the specific target – the exit interview – was especially deserving of a jab. Sad to say, for many companies the exit interview hasn't evolved much from the laughable process mocked in the story, which was written seven years ago.

The general idea of the exit interview is legitimate enough: to gather valuable information that can be used to improve the company and protect it from potential legal issues. But for employees on their way out, the exit interview means treading a thin line between constructive criticism and a badly burned bridge. Far too often, they leave thinking, "Why didn't they ask this stuff six months ago?" That is, assuming the employee says anything significant at all: Another common pitfall is generic information that serves no purpose.

So, how should we go about revising the process so everybody wins – companies receive honest, valuable feedback, and when appropriate employees can count on a good reference and leave in good standing?

An ideal first step is to take a hard look at how you conduct the exit interview. Is it done in person, online or over the phone, or is it written? Is it done by HR? Is the employee's supervisor present? Is there a follow-up? Each option has pros and cons, but generally some sort of face-to-face meeting is favorable.

Unfortunately, I've heard the occasional story about companies that pressed employees – after they'd already left – to complete an automated phone questionnaire. Some HR departments make a strong case for waiting a week or two after an employee leaves to conduct an in-person or phone interview, in order to provide some emotional distance and allow the employee to gather her thoughts. But hounding someone who's no longer employed there to complete an automated process is impersonal at best and insulting at worst.

Next, employers – perhaps with the help of an outside specialist – should con-

sider not only which questions they ask, but how they ask them. Many companies believe simply asking open-ended questions ("Why are you leaving?" "How good was your relationship with your boss?" "Was money a factor?") is the best they can do. But the answers usually generated ("A better opportunity came along" "I liked my boss fine" and "No, I feel I was fairly compensat-




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ed here") suggest otherwise.

To generate more specific information, some companies use a ratings system. The key here is to solicit feedback about the rating without making the employee feel threatened; i.e., "You gave this one a 7 – not a bad rating, but what do you think a 9 or 10 looks like?" While this strategy takes considerably more work, it can be considerably more effective.

Finally, consider soliciting such feedback while the employee is still a member of the team, not on his or her way out the

door. Perhaps if more we invested the time to do so, we wouldn't have to conduct as many of the dreaded exit interviews in the first place – wouldn't that be a nice alternative? 

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