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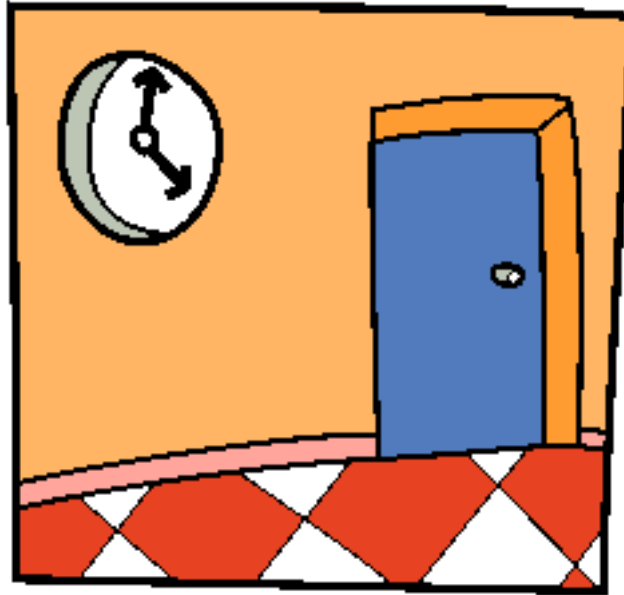
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Exit Interviews



A urce developed for federal court personnel by the Federal Judicial Center

This Federal Judicial Center publication was undertaken in furtherance of the Center's statutory mission to develop and conduct education programs for judicial branch employees. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily of the Federal Judicial Center.

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Exit Interviews

Why do them

Replacing individuals who leave an organization is costly. Recruiting, selecting, and training replacements takes time and energy. And it may take considerable time for the new person to gain the experience needed for the position.

The information solicited during an exit interview provides a check on the health of your office. Employees have many reasons for leaving, and organizations that solicit and study feedback from departing employees can make changes that help them retain others. Exit interviews also help you verify what is working well.

The seven reasons for leaving most frequently cited by employees are:



1. Lack of recognition. *The individual feels underappreciated, that his or her contributions are not acknowledged, or that his or her presence does not “make a difference.”*



2. Advancement Opportunities. *The employee sees few or no opportunities for promotion or growth within the organization.*



3. Money. *The individual seeks higher pay to increase his or her living standard or believes that he or she is being unfairly compensated compared to others.*

4. Too many bosses. *Lines of authority are hazy, such that people are unsure whom they answer to and are pulled in different directions by conflicting demands.*

5. Personality conflicts. *The individual experiences friction with co-workers, immediate supervisors, or management.*

6. Underqualification. *Because of poor selection practices, the employee is not fully qualified for the job and feels overwhelmed (the “in-over-my-head” response).*

7. Overqualification. *The employee is qualified for or capable of more challenging or interesting work.**

* McConnell, Charles R. “The Exit Interview: Locking the Barn Door.” *Health Care Supervisor* 11 (March 1992): 1–10.

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Who should do them

A neutral party should conduct an exit interview, someone who the departing employee perceives as fair and interested in the person's opinions. An ombudsman would be a good choice. The individual's supervisor would not.

When there is no neutral person inside the office, contact someone in another part of the court or outside the court to conduct the interview. For example, consider working with a local university that has a human resources program. The goal is to have the departing employee provide honest responses, and you need to put him or her at ease to do this.

When to do them

Conduct exit interviews during employees' final week of work, but not on their last day, which should be reserved for good-byes and administrative matters such as turning in keys.

Allow ample time. Letting departing employees speak their minds and set the pace of conversation can promote the open sharing of information.

Where to do them

A disadvantage of conducting exit interviews over lunch at restaurants is that even if no one listens in on your conversation, the departing employees may worry that someone will hear them and may thus be less forthcoming.

Instead, choose a private location. At a minimum, select an office or conference room with a door that can be closed. Others should be able neither to hear nor to see you.

Also, ask not to be disturbed. If you are interrupted, both parties may find it hard to reestablish rapport.



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What questions to ask

Before jumping in to your questions, be sure to observe the general rules of effective interviewing: Explain the purpose—that you are trying to determine what might make the [clerk's office/probation office/circuit executive's office/etc.] a better place to work. Acknowledge that there is no obligation to answer any question. Also, assure the individual that his or her comments will be held in confidence.

Ask the most nonthreatening questions first to establish a rapport with the employee. Take notes of key points during the meeting, but stop taking notes if the employee begins to talk about sensitive issues; write down those comments during a "lighter" moment.

Remain open and interested throughout the interview. Solicit the employee's perspective and show sincere interest in his or her opinion. Use nondirective interviewing techniques to elicit more information. Ask, "Can you elaborate?," "Can you say more?" and "Can you give some examples?" Clarify comments by asking, "Do I understand you to be saying . . . ?" Be careful to remain neutral throughout the interview and to avoid justifying management's actions. You are there solely to record the employee's perceptions of the office.

Here is a list of questions which you can tailor for your exit interviews. Note: Some supervisors recommend giving employees a list of the questions they will be asked before the interview. [Click here to print out a sample employee questionnaire.](#)

Interview Questions

Nature of the job

- What did you like most about your responsibilities? What did you most dislike?
- Did your roles, duties, and workload meet your expectations? Describe any significant differences between your expectations and your actual responsibilities.
- How would you rate your compensation for the level of your responsibilities?
- What do you see as the office's mission and your role in the overall work of the office?
- How did orientation and training increase your success in your job? (Consider both initial orientation and orientation and training within your unit.)

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- When we advertise to fill your position, what types of skills should we seek in candidates?
- What should we tell candidates about your position?

Work environment

- How would you describe office morale?
- How effective are communications within your department and within the office as a whole?
- What could be done to make this organization a better place to work?
- What do you think are the office's greatest strengths?
- What do you think are the office's most pressing issues or problems?

Management and supervision

- How well did your supervisor know and understand your job duties?
- How much recognition did you receive from your supervisor for work done?
- Were you told when you did things well or when you needed to improve? Please explain.
- How equitable is the distribution of work among the employees in your department?
- What additional instruction, supervision, or equipment might have enabled you to perform your job duties better?
- What would you recommend to improve procedures or work conditions for the position you are leaving?

Reasons for leaving

- What are the major reasons for your leaving?
- What prompted you to look for another job?
- What opportunities for transfer and promotion in this organization were of interest to you?
- What opportunities for personal and professional development in this organization did you find most useful?

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- What advantages does your new employer offer that are lacking here?
- Would you consider reemployment here?

Questions for a manager or supervisor

- Did you consider your management goals to be in line with those of senior management? Please explain.
- What was your greatest frustration as a manager in this position?

Questions for a technical employee

- Did you receive sufficient technical training to do your job? What could improve the training?
- How would you describe the opportunity for advancement or enrichment for someone in your position?

Conclusion

- Is there anything else that you would like to comment on?
- Do you have any unanswered questions?
- Are there any specific persons with whom you would like me to share this information?

Confidentiality



When you first advise the departing employee of the exit interview, explain that you will want to share his or her comments with management but that you will keep confidential those remarks that he or she wishes. Explain that you use a special notepad in which you record confidential responses from all departing candidates, then during the interview, do exactly that. Have a notepad separate from the sheet you use to record “on-the-record” comments, and whenever the individual indicates that he or she wants a response to remain anonymous, write it down in the notepad.



At the close of the interview, consider whether the confidential material listed in the notepad needs to be communicated. If the individual was just venting, the comments need go no further; your note taking helped the person clear the air. If, however, the individual identified

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problems or concerns that you believe should be brought to someone's attention, ask the individual to reconsider keeping his or her remarks confidential. Say, "Something you said during our discussion seems important for management to hear. I will respect your wishes, but would you consider giving this feedback directly, or give me permission to pass this along?"

After the interview, you can do several things with the confidential material. If you are in an office where there is a significant amount of turnover, you can collect the information and report trends or themes that you notice, without identifying what specific individuals said. You can also be a voice for the departed employee, raising his or her concerns and perspectives at appropriate points in ongoing discussions.

How to use exit interview results

One person's departure can influence others to follow suit, leading, in a worst-case scenario, to an exodus. How staff perceive that management handles departures is thus of prime importance—particularly how (or whether) management acts on advice given by departing employees.

Do not base actions you take on the results of one exit interview. Wait until you have enough data to establish a trend.



Look for common themes among departing employees' observations. Does interview data suggest that you should replace old equipment? Improve efficiency and productivity? Redesign work areas? Alleviate undesirable working conditions?



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Resources

The Curse of the Vanishing Employees: How to Retain and Motivate Great Workers (FJC Media Catalog No. 3727-V/98). CRM Films, 1998. 20 minutes, Leader's guide.

This program demonstrates how to use exit interviews to solicit information about what works well and what can be improved in the office. The video shows five things managers, supervisors and team leaders can do to prevent high turnover and create a team of high-achieving, loyal employees. Instructions for conducting a two or three-hour training session are also included.

[Order now from the Federal Judicial Center Media Library](#)

Hire the Right Person: Effective Interviewing

This Federal Judicial Center workshop shows participants how to use effective interviewing methods to make better hiring and promotion decisions.

To schedule, contact Center staff at (202) 502-4104.

Readings

Buhler, Patricia M. "Managing in the 90s: Meeting the Challenge of Retaining Employees." *Supervision* 59 (April 1998): 24—26.

Ettorre, Barbara. "How to Get the Unvarnished Truth." *HR Focus* 74 (August 1997): 1, 4—5.

Kessler, Robin. "Say Good-bye with Style." *HRMagazine* 43 (June 1998): 171—74.

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Exit Interview Questionnaire

Our court is interested in improving its organization. The responses to this questionnaire will help management identify strengths and possible areas of concern in our office. Please be as specific as possible when answering questions. Your responses can play a vital role in the growth of this organization. Thank you.

Directions: Please answer the following questions and return your completed questionnaire to the human resources office. Your responses will remain confidential.

Your Position: _____ Date: _____

Leaving: ☐ Voluntarily ☐ Involuntarily ☐ Retirement ☐ Transfer

Nature of the job

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