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EXIT INTERVIEWS

## Exit interviews can also be used to reveal good

Many HR professionals use exit interviews as a way to identify and articulate why employees are leaving to help reduce employee turnover. What many HR professionals overlook is a chance to identify areas that ARE working in the organization. The latest trend in exit interviews is to focus on the bright side, and work to replicate that across the company. Increasing the 'good' at a company can go just as far as decreasing the 'bad' when it comes to employee retention and morale.

Nationally recognized expert Beth N. Carvin, CEO of Nobscot Corporation, participated in the following interview with CCH, a Wolters Kluwer company.

Carvin discussed the latest trends in exit interviews.

**CCH: What do you think HR is getting right about exit interviews and what are they getting wrong?**

**Carvin:** Most HR practitioners understand the value of exit interviews. They really want to get feedback on the drivers of turnover. Many put in a valiant effort in order to do so. The challenge is that most HR departments have not changed their exit interview tactics to go along with the times. They make the effort to meet employees or call them. They ask probing questions. They take notes. They share them with colleagues. Then put them in the file. Some compile the information in a spreadsheet.

This method leaves you with some understanding of where issues are occurring but in the form of anecdotal clues rather than objective evidence.

While other HR processes have modernized with technology, the exit interviews in most companies are still done manually. Some of the challenges with conducting exit interviews the "old-fashioned" way: employees today rarely open up verbally; they are difficult to reach by telephone; and looking at exit interview results one at a time doesn't provide objective, actionable data.

**CCH: Are exit interviews worth while with every departing employee or should HR be selective?**

**Carvin:** Some companies limit who they exit interview due to limited resources. If they do, they should start with the highest turnover areas rather than basing it on the level of the employees. Any area where turnover is costly or it's difficult to recruit replacements is also a good place

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to start. For example in banking, there tends to be high turnover in the teller area and the call center. Healthcare may have turnover and difficulty recruiting nurses.

### **CCH: Why is it such a good idea for HR to identify areas that are working in an organization through exit interviews?**

**Carvin:** Exit interviews used to be only about finding the negatives. That is still a primary usage but today we see a number of other uses of exit interviews as well. One area is focusing on the "bright spots."

There are three uses of bright spots:

1. Provide positive feedback, rewards and recognition to those who are doing a great job;
2. Replicate your successes from one area to another; identify mentors from the success areas to help the more troubled areas; and
3. Learn which programs are highly valued by employees so that when cutting costs you don't accidentally cut an important program and create a turnover

problem that costs more than the savings from cutting the program.

### **CCH: Is there still value in asking about "the bad?"**

**Carvin:** Absolutely. The cost of turnover is so high that exit interviews still remain the best way to get to the real drivers of turnover. We call those drivers "irritations." They are the things that build up over time and eventually cause the employee to seek employment elsewhere. Remember, when you hire an employee they are at their peak of excitement. They don't plan to leave. Something happens between the time they enthusiastically accept the job offer to when they begin to look at opportunities elsewhere. The exit interviews, when done properly, help you pinpoint where, when, and why things go wrong.

Make sure you include both quantitative (numerically rated) questions and qualitative (open ended and comments). The questions can include items about the work environment, direct supervisor, compensation, the work itself, and the company.

### **CCH: Are there other trends you are seeing in exit interviews**

### **right now besides focusing on the positive?**

**Carvin:** A couple of other trends — using exit interviews to measure the success of diversity initiatives. When you can easily track your exit interview response data by gender and race you can begin to see if women and people of color are experiencing the workplace the same or different from the white males.

Another trend is combining exit interviews with new hire surveys. This allows you to capture a full picture of data. New hire surveys help you audit the recruitment process, onboarding, initial training, and socialization (fitting into the company). When this is combined with the exit interview data you can get a real life cycle of information to identify where things are going wrong...or right! □



Basic exit interview procedures are discussed at ¶13409 in the HR Practices Guide Explanations. You will also find a discussion of how exit interviews can help improve morale and retention at that location. And, a sample exit interview policy can be found at ¶12957.