Conducting Exit Interviews

Exit interviewing is an integral part of any solid and effective retention plan. But how do you know if you're really getting the whole story?

You can obtain useful, in-depth information on the true reason an employee is leaving, as well as the employee's impressions of and experience with the company by constructing your questions to ensure the departing employee is willing and motivated to provide this information. Asking the right questions is one part of the equation, while the other part is creating a safe and comfortable environment to encourage candor.

Capturing quantitative and qualitative data through exit interviews is extremely helpful in better understanding how existing retention strategies are working. Data from exit interviews can be gathered through ratings in a survey format and also by asking questions to gather comments and learn about individual experiences. Taking this "high touch" approach provides richer and deeper data. Quantitative data indicates can measure an individual's opinion in specific areas. Qualitative data gives context to the quantitative data and further illuminate an individual's quantitative response.

For example, suppose an individual rates compensation as having a high influence on the decision to resign. You are left with the conclusion that compensation was an issue. However, if the individual comments, "I was happy with my pay but once I started looking for a job, I was surprised at how much more I was offered in my new position," it is clearer that pay was a driving force in accepting a new job but it was not what motivated the individual to begin looking for a new job.

In the above scenario you would want to probe on what motivated the individual to begin the job search as the primary issue to be addressed in the retention strategy with pay as a secondary issue.

As you conduct the interviews, comments can be encouraged but don't force them. We've all seen TV courtrooms where the opposing counsel objects and says "Leading the witness." We always keep this in mind when asking follow up questions. So if a comment is given and it's not quite clear, try saying "I'm not quite clear; would you clarify this please?" It is critical to not bias the data.

Having conducted exit interviews for several years, MRA has found that most participants in the exit interview process are happy to provide their opinions. In fact they often thank us for calling them on behalf of the company.

Many past employees continue relationships with their former co-workers and desire to provide an accurate depiction of their experience to make it better for their former co-workers. There is a perception by some that you should never say anything negative during your exit interview. In other words, "Don't burn your bridges!" Also, some managers question the validity and completeness of data provided in exit interviews.

A twofold approach can combat that concern.

1. Keep the data confidential. Report responses in a cumulative fashion so specific statements cannot be identified.

2. Use highly trained interviewers. Train your interviewers or work with a third party provider.

Interviewers should be able to develop a rapport so individuals feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Establishing a level of trust with former employees enriches the process. It makes sense for leaders to know why people leave, and to leverage this information to influence strategic plans and big picture decisions. An executive summary and/or a dashboard shared on a quarterly, semi-annual, or annual basis can highlight key findings and allow you to see any patterns.

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