

Conducting Exit Interviews

by Olivier Serrat

Exit interviews provide feedback on why employees leave, what they liked about their job, and where the organization needs improvement. They are most effective when data is compiled and tracked over time. The concept has been revisited as a tool to capture knowledge from leavers. Exit interviews can be a win-win situation: the organization retains a portion of the leaver's knowledge and shares it; the departing employee articulates unique contributions and leaves a mark.

Rationale

Together with staff engagement surveys, exit interviews are one of the most widely used methods of gathering employee feedback. The less tacit and explicit knowledge an organization captures from staff on a regular basis, the more it needs to capture when they exit. Exit interviews are a unique chance to survey and analyze the opinions of departing employees, who are generally more forthcoming and objective on such occasions. From an employer's perspective, the purpose is to learn from the employee's departure on the basis that feedback is a helpful driver of organizational performance improvement.

More recently, the practice of exit interviews has been revisited as a knowledge management tool to capture and store knowledge from departing employees and minimize loss through staff turnover. This is especially relevant in roles where the employee embodies significant human capital that may be passed to appropriate employees remaining in the organization. Most departing employees are pleased to share knowledge, help a successor, or brief management, in so doing yield information that may be used to enhance all aspects of an organization's working environment including culture, management, business processes, and intra- as well as inter-organizational relationships. Notwithstanding, participation in exit interviews and responses to exit interview questionnaires must be voluntary.

Benefits

At negligible cost, the benefits of learning-based exit interviews are that they

- Help retain vital knowledge in the organization.
- Shorten the learning curve of new employees or successors to the departing employee.
- Catalyze identification of specific mistakes and improvement opportunities.
- Enhance the understanding and experience that managers have of managing people and organizations.
- Inform management succession planning.
- Support an organization's human resource practices.
- Provide direct indications on how to improve staff retention.



- Generate useful information for training needs analysis and training planning processes.
- Result in the departing employee having a more positive view of the organization and its culture.

Preparation

Face-to-face interactions are central to exit interviews. The management of the exit interview process must be initiated as early as possible after it is known that the employee is leaving. In preparation, it is important to

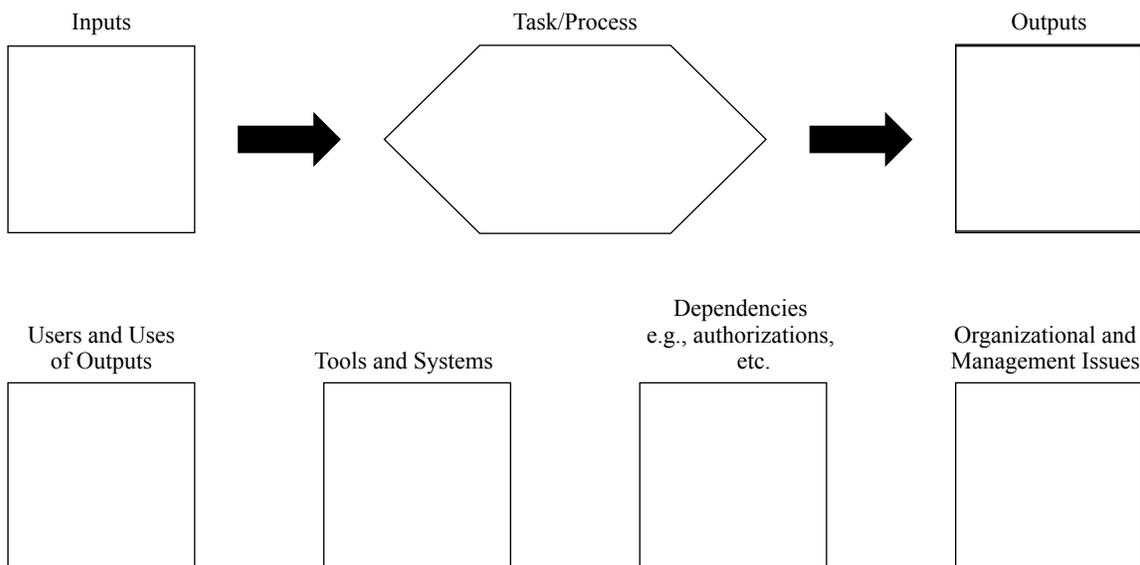
- Consider who currently accesses the departing employee's knowledge and what they need to know from the replacement staff. It is useful in this respect to think about documented explicit knowledge (in files, documents, and electronic mails) as well as tacit knowledge (know-how) that need to be explained.
- Develop a plan in a participatory way to ensure that knowledge can be captured and stored during the departing employee's notice period. This requires a review of key tasks, drawing from the original terms of reference of the departing employee. For explicit knowledge, the departing employee should move relevant files into shared folders or a document library. Ideally, they should organize all files and draw up a related set of notes for the successor. For important tacit knowledge, activity-based knowledge mapping could prove useful, providing a framework for conversations about how key activities are undertaken, what inputs and outputs are involved, or what obstacles and bottlenecks might exist. Internal and external networks and other sources of knowledge could also be discussed.

Last Words

The last words of departing employees can provide valuable insights into corporate culture, dysfunctions, and opportunities to do better. It is important to listen carefully during an exit interview, track answers, and look for long-term trends. But it is even more important to act on the information received to correct mistakes or improve further in areas of success.

Figure: Activity-Based Mapping Template

Key Activity



Source: Author.

Table: Exit Interview Questionnaire¹

Details (to be completed by the unit but checked by the departing employee)	
Name:	_____
Gender:	_____
Nationality:	_____
Position:	_____
Level:	_____
Type of contract:	_____
Start and Finish Date:	_____
What Next	
What are you going to do?	_____
If employment, who will be your new employer?	_____
If employment, what sort of job and at what level?	_____
If employment, what attracted you to your new job?	_____
If employment, how will your new job differ from your current one?	_____
About the Unit	
Do you feel the description of your job in the engagement process was accurate?	_____
Were the purpose and expected results of your position clear throughout your work in the unit?	_____
Could your qualifications, experience, and skills have been used to better advantage?	_____
Do you feel you received appropriate support to enable you to do your job?	_____
Was the training you received in the unit adequate to enable you to accomplish your job?	_____
Are there further training opportunities you think the unit should be offering?	_____
What did you see as your promotion and career prospects in the unit?	_____
How might those prospects have been improved?	_____
How was your working environment generally?	_____
Can you list the three most important things that should be done to make the unit more effective in terms of influencing decisions in the organization?	_____
Others	
Can you suggest ways to improve this questionnaire?	_____
Signed: _____	Date: _____

Source: Author.

¹ Please return to the head of the unit (or office, division, or department as appropriate) with copy to designated supervising staff.

Box: Sample Exit Interview Questions

The following questions can be used in face-to-face exit interviews to complement or deepen, on a case-by-case basis, the responses made to the exit interview questionnaire.

General

- What was satisfying during your time in the unit? What was frustrating?
- What could you have done better or more?
- What extra responsibility would you have welcomed?

Induction

- Were you inducted adequately for your role(s)?
- What improvement could be made to the way you were inducted for your role(s)?

Training and Development

- How well do think your training and development needs were assessed and met?
- What training and development did you find helpful and enjoyable?
- What training and development would you have liked or needed that you did not receive and what effect would that have had?

Performance Evaluation

- What can you say about the way your performance was measured and the feedback on your performance results?
- How well do you think the performance and development plan worked for you?
- How would you have changed the expectations (or absence of) that were placed on you? And why?

Communications

- What can you say about communications in the unit? How could these be improved?
- What could you say about communications between the unit and other departments and offices? How could these be improved?

Working Conditions

- How would you describe the culture of the unit?
- What suggestion would you make to improve working conditions?
- What examples of inefficiencies in business processes and procedures in the unit could you point to?
- How could the unit reduce stress levels among employees where stress is an issue?

Management

- What can you say about the way you were managed? On a day-to-day basis? On a month-to-month basis?
- What things did the unit and its management do to make your job more difficult?
- What would you say about how you were motivated and how could that have been improved?
- How could the unit have enabled you to have made better use of your time?

Knowledge Transfer

- What would you consider to be your foremost knowledge assets?
- How might your explicit and tacit knowledge be transferred prior to your departure?
- Would you be happy to take part in a briefing meeting with managers, replacements, successor, and/or colleagues so that we can benefit further from your knowledge prior to your departure?
- What can the unit do to enable you to pass on as much of your knowledge as possible to your replacement or successor prior to your departure?
- How and when would you prefer to pass on your knowledge to your successor?
- Could you introduce (name of successor) to your key contacts before you go?
- How can the unit gather and make better use of the knowledge of employees?

For further information

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Asian Development Bank

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