

Meaningful exit interviews: Building a positive employee experience alongside organizational brand

Relooking how exit interviews can be more meaningful for employees as well as the organization as a long-term brand-building mechanism.



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By Dr Saikat Chakraborty, Debasmita Dash, Pallabi Ganguly

Exit interviews have been in place for a long time in organizations, primarily used for gauging why an employee is resigning. One idea was to use it as a retention strategy and convince employees to stay back by providing some perks and benefits. However, an employee with a bitter experience, lured to stay back with a handsome increment, continues to harbour antagonistic sentiments about the organization and will eventually leave for a better opportunity. Unarguably, exit interviews as a reactive measure to troubleshoot problems remain a short-term solution to deepseated issues.

Over time, exit interviews have become a routine activity of little use. Although conducted keeping the firm on focus, these interviews hardly generate any insight valuable for the organization. More than the kind of questions asked, how such interviews are conducted, including the treatment offered to employees, is barely given a thought. Questions such

as why are you leaving, what is the cause, what can be improved here, how was the experience, and so on, turns into a monotonous conversation. Subjectivity involved is never paid any attention, forget importance. The employee **feels disengaged**, knowing it is a useless protocol followed from which nothing meaningful can be gained. There is **nil effort to build relationships** that can help both the organization and the employee in the long run.

Moreover, with increasing reliance on numbers for decision-making, organizations nowadays use objective questionnaires with a Likert-like scale for data collection and analysis. The crucial point missed is that such methods reassert the reification of employees, failing to capture the employee's genuine emotions and core problems in the organization. Reporting about one's pain and disgust on a scale of 1 to 7 is as bitter as the cause of grievance. Rated the same on scale, the reasons for leaving might differ entirely. Despite being a quicker and time-saving method than face-to-face interactions, **the management must decide on the kind of interview they want to conduct. Especially the treatment they wish to offer their employees, leaving the organization or otherwise.**

Thus, in the present state of how exit interviews are conducted, the organization loses out on understanding the genuine feedback of employees that can solve deep-seated problems and the positive word of mouth to help attract and retain future talent. The question then arises—**can exit interviews be mutually beneficial for the employee and the organization and used as a tool to build a brand in the long run?** If the answer to this question is affirmative, we need to think deeper about how exit interviews should be conducted.

To make exit interviews meaningful, **we first suggest making them employee-focused.** The interviewer, either the HR personnel or the line manager, must be interested in knowing why the employee is leaving. Some might argue that it will remain challenging to get honest answers as the employee may not see the interview that way. However, conducting exit interviews in a humanistic way, which **means not just what is being asked but also how humanely they are asked** and the responses received, brings a change. There should also be interest in exploring the employee's plans and aspirations, options they are looking forward to, their long-term vision, and so on, **indicating that the organization cares for them even after separation.** After all, the exit interview is the last chance for the organization to mend broken ties and ensure that employees go out with a positive experience.

This brings us to how exit interviews can also be valuable for the organization. Interviews conducted actively rather than passively will generate rich and valuable insights for managers to work on improving the state of affairs. Unlike survey results and objective questionnaires, the data generated from active exit interviews will be a potent source of information. The possibility of understanding and tackling the fundamental nature of problems in the organization more holistically increases rather than recurrent troubleshooting based on the tip of the iceberg. Moreover, active exit interviews will trigger relationship building, which will be helpful as a brand-building exercise. Such employees will go out as brand ambassadors, and their word-of-mouth marketing will help the organization in the long run. In light of the post-pandemic era of 'the great resignation', organizations should indeed see exit interviews as opportunities to build their unique brand. After all, the very employees resigning might decide to come back and bring others too, and who knows, it could well lead into an era of "the great comeback!"

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