



The **Real Exit** Interview

What Employees Aren't Telling You on Their Way Out

By Freada Kapor Klein

Jose Cisneros, a Latino finance professional, said he was leaving to pursue an entrepreneurial opportunity. He was convinced that his employer passed his departure off as one that couldn't have been avoided, given his natural entrepreneurial spirit.

But the truth was that Jose preferred to work for an established institution and had no plans to become an entrepreneur.

After several years of hearing "countless Mexican jokes," Jose felt uncomfortable and unwelcome. A self-defined "light skinned Latino," who was often mistaken for Italian, he heard offensive remarks about Mexicans and blacks from many managers, including his own. Despite the fact that others knew about these remarks, nothing was done. So Jose took action and left.

A new study reveals the real reason why many professionals and managers voluntarily leave their employer is workplace unfairness. "The Corporate Leavers Survey," conducted by the Level Playing Field Institute, found unfairness, such as being stereotyped, passed over for a promotion, and subjected to offensive jokes, is the sole reason why 2 million professionals and managers leave their employers each year. Given that the most conservative estimate to replace these workers is \$64 billion annually—equivalent to the 2006 combined

revenues of Google, Amazon, Starbucks, and Goldman Sachs—employers can't afford not to know the truth about why their employees are leaving.

Employees don't divulge the truth about their leaving for many reasons, including fear of burning bridges and skepticism that any meaningful change will result. One Asian female attorney who participated in the survey recalls that her exit interview consisted of a 15-minute meeting with the newly hired director of professional development. "She basically went down a checklist of 10 items and asked how I would rate various things at the firm," the woman laments. "She didn't once ask why I was leaving, nor did I have any faith she would take what I said to heart," she says.

Although employees have many reasons for being less than fully candid, employers can greatly improve their exit interview procedures to address some of these concerns. For example, an organization can enlist a third party or ombudsperson to conduct exit interviews to ensure confidentiality. It also can follow up on initial exit interviews by conducting a supplemental survey three to six months after the employee leaves.

Interview data should be aggregated to protect anonymity and identify recurring themes. If a particular department or business unit is large or has a high attrition rate, that information should be separated from the rest of the organization and evaluated. Data also should be grouped according to employee demographics to identify any themes or issues that correlate with gender, race, or sexual orientation.

A large part of the survey was aimed at determining what, if anything, employers could have done to prevent those 2 million departures. Not surprisingly, one of the top factors that would have prompted respondents to reconsider leaving their employers was receiving fair pay. Twenty-nine percent of blacks, 41 percent of homosexuals, 24 percent of heterosexual Caucasian women, and 28 percent of heterosexual Caucasian men indicated they most likely would have stayed if their employer paid them more fairly.

However, a fair salary was the most important concern only for heterosexual Caucasians. In comparison, better benefits was the biggest concern of gay and lesbian professionals and managers. One lesbian retail professional said she left because her employer offered pet insurance for animals such as rats and pigs, but not for domestic partners.

"Better managers who recognized (their employees') abilities" was the top response for blacks. An African American portfolio manager who participated in the survey left because his "boss didn't think black people could play quarterback." Not only did his boss fail to acknowledge that black quarterbacks could make crucial decisions and call the correct plays, but he also applied the same flawed thinking toward his own employees.

Similarly, blacks and homosexuals identified several steps their employers could have taken to prevent their departure that other groups did not. Blacks felt more strongly about these aspects of working life than their colleagues: staffing decisions based on qualifications, more diverse workforce, mentoring programs, confidential complaint process, better diversity policies, and corporate citizenship. Likewise, homosexuals felt more strongly about respectful work environment, meaningful work, change in manager, counseling or training to deal with difficult people or situations, change in work group, and better geographical location.

Although data collected during the exit process won't help you keep the departing employee, it can help you keep the ones you still have—provided that it's acted upon. If a departing employee mentions problems with a specific manager, investigate. When a particular issue is identified repeatedly, use anonymous surveys of current and former employees to identify problem areas.

Exit interviews don't have to be a nuisance or an uncomfortable necessity. Done properly, they can be an invaluable tool for developing and strengthening retention strategies because there is no one better to tell you how

Five Tips for Conducting Better Exit Interviews

1. Give employees a choice of who conducts their exit interviews. Make sure their options reflect diversity in demographics and position.
2. Don't just follow a checklist. Allow for creative open-ended questions. For example, ask "What three things could have been done to help you stay?" Open-ended questions yield much more information than simply asking the reason for leaving.
3. Find out your company's reputation by asking departing employees whether they would recommend your organization to a potential recruit. Does their answer depend on the business unit or the recruit's gender, age, race, ethnicity, or culture? Also, ask whether they would recommend your company's products or services to friends or family.
4. Provide departing employees with an anonymous way to offer more feedback.
5. Have someone knowledgeable about your company's culture interview employees six to 24 months after they leave. This allows them to reflect on what your company did well, what they miss, and what you could have done to make them stay.

to retain talent than the person who's walking out your door.

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