

September 1, 2013

Data Analysis

Growth Opportunity

Leverage feedback from exiting employees to find problems—and solve them.

By Kerrie Main

While business leaders understand the importance of collecting employee feedback, many are not getting the return on investment for their efforts. In fact, many organizations make several common mistakes when it comes to properly collecting and executing on employee data. Do you fall into this category?

1. *Managers are the ones conducting exit interviews.* This is a huge mistake because if the manager is the problem, most employees will not admit to it to their face. Exit interviews that are conducted in an online portal may produce more honest responses.
2. *Not asking the right questions.* Reconsider your exit interview questions. Never ask two questions in one statement. Put yourself in the departing employee's perspective and consider how you would feel answering the questions. Do not use exit interview questions that ask for feelings or emotions.
3. *Not having a methodology for viewing the data.* Set up the right demographics for your organization. This would include length of service, department/division, gender, and race. Be sure you are able to sort and parse the data as a whole to identify employee turnover drivers in the particular groups, as well as to earn a view of what's happening in the organization as a whole.
4. *Jumping to conclusions or making assumptions.* This is where "anecdotal" takes over. If you're only looking at employee feedback from the individual perspective—an employee's particular complaints and problems—it's too risky to base business strategies and planning around it. The story may or may not be accurate, and management risks going in the wrong direction or conversely dismissing the problem without solving it.
5. *Searching for problems only.* Exit interviews and other employee feedback can be used to identify the bright spots in the organization as well. This information can be used to replicate successes in other areas of the organization, as well as identify high performers for management positions or mentorships.

These mistakes can be easily solved by simply approaching the employee feedback processes in a new, analytical way. Traditionally, the purpose of exit interviews was for executives and managers to gain an understanding of why a particular employee was leaving the company and in some cases, to present a counter-offer. This is a short-term anecdotal way of thinking. To move to an analytical perspective, exit interviews should be viewed as an opportunity to learn about the company.

One organization, INTEGRIS Health, Inc. outsourced their exit interviews to a provider that conducted them over the phone, but their participation rates were low—around 7 percent. They were only given raw exit data, and it wasn't substantial enough to support any claims being made by departments and managers about company turnover. INTEGRIS switched to an online exit interview management system. Their participation rates increased, and the company was able to identify the issue of significantly higher turnover of metro nurses before the 90-day mark. This data linked to specific cultural issues with their onboarding process, and the company has implemented new initiatives to curb it.

Rather than looking at each individual exit interview in a vacuum, the exit interviews (and all employee feedback processes) should be looked at as pieces of a puzzle that come together to create a picture of employee turnover drivers. Exit interview data can be analyzed to identify areas of concern and trends that are causing turnover. With that valuable information, managers can formulate actionable items that can be implemented to improve the organization. This bigger picture approach is not possible with anecdotal feedback.

Here are five tips to transform employee feedback from anecdotal to analytical:

1. *Ask the right questions that will allow for trending and analysis.* A best-practices approach combines quantitative (numerically-rated) and qualitative (open-ended) questions.
2. *Set up a tracking method so you can easily view your averages.* Small companies with low turnover can use something as simple as a spreadsheet, while larger organizations and those with high-turnover positions like tellers, call centers or nurses, can leverage an exit interview management system. This type of technology allows HR to automate the exit interview process—set

Exit interview data can be analyzed to identify areas of concern and trends that are causing turnover. With that valuable information, managers can formulate actionable items that can be implemented to improve the organization.

up exit interviews online, email them to employees, and then be able to automatically capture, track, and statistically analyze the exit data.

3. *Have a methodology to view and aggregate the data.* Be able to look at it from a wide variety of ways—from the overall organizational standpoint, by departments, by gender, by length of service, etc.
4. *Use internal benchmarks.* Look at the average rating for the entire company—your internal benchmark—and then look for areas that are above and below average. Look at higher-than-average areas to see what they're doing well so you can replicate it in other areas. Look for the lower rated areas to identify your problems.
5. *Make the time to look at the data you've gathered.* Having great information won't help if you don't look at it to learn what it's telling you.

In the past, it was difficult to make the move from anecdotal to analytical. Using exit interviews as an example, each company would have sheets of individually completed exit interviews. Forward-thinking companies would enter the results into a spreadsheet and use that to track trends. Today there is sophisticated technology designed specifically to allow employees to complete exit interviews online and have all the results available for review and analysis. These exit interview management systems let companies look at the numbers and spot the trends and then use the anecdotes to highlight or illustrate the situations uncovered.
