

Employee Exit Interview – An Overlooked HR Procedure in Fiji

Mr. Avineel Avineet Kumar

The University of Fiji, Saweni Lautoka, Fiji

Corresponding Author: Mr. Avineel Avineet Kumar

Abstract: *Organisations invest a lot of effort, energy, time and money to hire the most suitably qualified candidate through internal or external means whenever there is a job opening. These candidates when offered a job are expected to perform with the best of their abilities by going an extra mile to achieve the individual, departmental and organisational goals. Organisations in Fiji are not different; their expectations from employees are even greater considering the competitive nature of business environment in Fiji. While a lot of effort goes into recruiting and selecting employees, it is evident that very little is done by organisations in Fiji to find the real reasons why employees leave organisations and where possible to prevent their departure through the structured Human Resource process of conducting “Exit Interviews”. This research focuses on why exit interviews are being overlooked by business organizations in Fiji along with its advantages and disadvantages.*

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I. Introduction

An exit interview has been described as a discussion between the departing employee and the employer, which can vary in structure and formality, and is designed to get information about their employment experience and motivations for leaving (Evans 2006; Rudman, 2002; Stone, 2005). Exit Interviews are conducted with employees who are leaving the organization to find out what exactly they think and feel about the organization. It is one of the most popular means of monitoring labour turnover in organisations.

Exit interviews have three goals; to maintain good public relations with the departing employee, to discover the employee’s reasons for leaving and to prevent the employees from leaving. (Stone, 2008). If exit interviews are properly undertaken by business organizations it can yield much revealing information about the Human Resource climate of the organization. Exit interviews provide useful data on how management and company policies could be improved. In general a good exit interview process can help the HR managers to discover the organizations strengths and weaknesses.

Exit interviews are often conducted face to face by the Human Resource Manager with direct input from line Managers of the departing employee. The content and methodology of the exit interview varies across different business organizations operating under different sectors and industries. The type of exit interview methods used mostly depends on the discretion of the senior management and the HR department of the concerned organization. Some commonly known methods available for conducting exit interviews are: In-person Exit Interviews, Telephone or on call based Exit Interviews, Paper and Pencil Exit Interviews, and Online Exit Interviews.

In person Exit Interview refers to the method where by the departing employee meets the HR manager/HR personnel of the company in person and discusses at length about his/her reasons for leaving. This is ideally very helpful as the HR manager of the company gets to have a more personal interaction with the departing employee and gain some valuable feedback about their departure.

Telephone or on call exit interviews are normally undertaken when the departing employee may not be able to meet in person with the HR manager due to remoteness of his/her location or simply because the departing employee is based in a different branch than that of where the HR is based. This method though is cost effective lacks the personal touch that an in person Exit Interview method has.

Paper and Pencil method refers to a manual form filling exercise where the departing employee is required to provide responses to a series of questions regarding their departure. The employee’s responses are then submitted to the HR office.

The online exit interview is where the departing employee has to fill in forms which have a series of questions online. Once the employee has answered the questions it is submitted electronically. Some organizations that use Human Resources related integrated systems such as Human Resources Integrated Management System (HRIMS) have this exit interview feature incorporated into their systems. It becomes

mandatory for all departing employees to fill in the required forms available online on this system before leaving with exception only given to employees who are dismissed or terminated from work by the organization.

The contents discussed in an exit interview can be wide ranging, including: reasons for leaving the job, perceptions of management and the organisation, the overall working conditions, organisational climate, socialisation issues, remuneration and benefits, training and development, quality of supervision, promotion opportunities and the overall satisfaction with the job itself. The main aim of conducting an exit interviews is to provide employers with information to help prevent the loss of other employees later, for example, through the identification of training and development needs (Green 2004).

There are various questions that could be asked when conducting exit interviews and some of these may include:

1. *Why are you leaving our organization?*
2. *Where are you going?*
 - *Geographic location*
 - *Name of the organization you would be joining.*
 - *Position/Title that you will hold*
 - *Remuneration that has been offered to you.*
3. *What do you think of your:*
 - *Remunerations and benefits*
 - *Job requirements*
 - *Supervisor relationship/support*
 - *Colleagues relationship/ support*
 - *Working conditions*
 - *Promotion opportunities*
 - *Training and development opportunities*
4. *What did you like/dislike about our organisation?*
5. *Would you consider returning?*
6. *Would you recommend the organization to others as a good place to work?*
7. *What could have been done to prevent you your departure from this organization?*
8. *What were some of the challenges you faced?*
9. *Were the resources, supervision, training and development provided to you adequate?*
10. *Do you have any suggestions or comments on how to improve things in your department, the organization as a whole?*

Responses obtained from above Exit Interview questions would allow organization to assess how well their retention strategies are working and update benefits and other programs to aid in future staff retention. There have been instances where the exit interviews have been conducted by an external consulting firm. Assuring confidentiality by using such measures is likely to produce more candid responses (Jadhav 2017). Exit interviews can provide valuable insights to the employers to know how to retain their talented staff and improve their work culture as well as the workplace environment.

Engaging employees in a dialogue and finding the actual reason behind their decision to leave an organization prior to their departure could also help the organization to retain its employees by giving the organization the opportunity to make counter offers to what the departing employee has been offered elsewhere. Furthermore, engaging employees in a dialogue just prior to their departure may encourage them to consider returning in the future as an employee and/or as a longer term stakeholder in the form of a customer, organisational advocate, etc.

Though the practice of conducting Exit interviews by Human Resource Department is very common in Western countries, this HR process is not given as much priority as it should be in Fiji. This research aims to discover why Exit interviews are being overlooked by business organizations in Fiji.

II. Method

From an initial sample size of 50 organizations, data was only collected from 46 Practicing Human Resource Managers across Fiji as 4 of the sample respondents turned down the request to participate in this research citing that they would be in breach of their organizations confidentiality and disclosure policies. The 46 Human Resources Managers that were interviewed, 29 were males (63%) and 17 were females (37%), representing various different private and public organizations mainly in Retail, Manufacturing, Tourism,

Entertainment, Telecommunication, Insurance, Real-estate, Financial services, Border control and National Security, Transportation and Logistics, Agriculture and Essential services.

From the 46 HR managers interviewed 38% stated that they had Masters degree qualification, 44% stated they had a Bachelors' degree qualification while 17% of the respondents stated that they had some tertiary level certificate qualification. The average year of experience as a practicing HR manager was 13 years with maximum being 28 and Minimum being 1.5 years of HR managerial experience in Fiji.

The sample respondents were interviewed face to face and their responses were carefully noted. Questionnaires that had open ended questions were also given out to the sample respondents to fill. Due to the sensitive nature of data being collected and to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of Individual companies the HR managers represented, the respondents were asked not to put their names on the questionnaire and they were assured that the information would not be disclosed to anyone other than the researcher. The responses from Questionnaires were coded, clustered and categorized using concepts of grounded theory for analytical purpose.

III. Analysis

It was revealed that out of 46 different business organizations, a majority 63% of the business organizations in Fiji had never conducted proper exit interviews with their departing employees under the leadership of their current HR manager/HR personnel. Majority of the HR managers seemed to be misguided between conducting exit interviews and conducting departure clearance.

Whilst staff departure clearances were conducted by most organisations, they mistakenly took this clearance process as their exit interview process. Random inspection of staff departure clearance forms and checklists during interview revealed that the sole purpose of departure clearance was only to ensure that the departing staff returned all the organizations possessions prior to their departure.

Returning of staff identification cards, office and locker keys, company mobile phones, company laptops, safety gear including safety boots, uniforms and other administrative and confidential documents were some key items the organizations ensured were returned before staff departure. It was noted that the staff clearance forms and the checklists did not meet the proper requirements that a structured exit interview process normally requires.

It was surprisingly noted that 11% of the practicing HR managers did not have any knowledge of the HR process of conducting exit interviews and found this concept relatively new. These were mostly young, junior HR Managers/ HR personnel who were in the early years of taking up their HR roles.

Furthermore 9% of the HR managers agreed that they had conducted exit interviews with their departing employees, they further highlighted it was mandatory for their organization to have proper exit interviews for Managerial as well as non-Managerial staff holding different positions across different branches. The feedbacks from exit interviews were well documented either manually and kept in staff file in their HR office or electronically saved on integrated Human Resource Management Information System (HRMIS) system.

In addition to this, 17% of the HR managers stated that they carried out exit interviews only for managerial level positions as they were mostly keen to know about their reasons for departure over other non managerial staff.

The respondents further agreed that only upon the recommendation of their CEO/ Managing Director or Branch Managers, they conducted exit interviews for non managerial staff.

When asked if there were proper HR policies in place in their respective companies for conducting exit interviews, 48% of the HR managers stated that they did not have any HR policies on exit interviews in their respective companies. 35% stated that they had proper HR policies in place that covered the nature and scope of conducting exit interviews. The HR managers used these policies to conducted exit interviews whenever a staff handed in their resignation.

17% of the HR Managers stated that while they did not have any HR policies covering exit interviews in their respective organizations, they were in consultation with their senior Management drafting such policies so that it could be implemented at its earliest.

It was revealed that the most common method of conducting exit interviews amongst business organizations was face to face at 40% followed by online using the HRMIS systems. The least preferred was telephone method of conducting exit interviews. The HR managers who stated that they preferred face to face method further agreed that it was convenient and an inexpensive method of conducting exit interviews.

Some HR managers agreed that apart from the traditional questions being asked during the exit interview sessions, they were there to observe the non verbal cues of the departing employees as well to gain a deeper insight and meaning as to why the employee was really leaving their organization. An example revealed was when a departing employees facial expressions changed from a smiling face to a more serious look when

asked about working relationship with their supervisors. Such sudden change in facial and expressions might hold deeper undisclosed truths regarding the employee's reason for departure.

A HR Manager further went on to state that some employees had "red face" (face turned red) when asked about promotional opportunities, a sign according to him was of dissatisfaction or anger of either being overlooked or over passed by someone else while on their job when it came to promotions. Another situation shared by a HR Manager was when an employee's tone noticeably dropped half way during the exit interview from a firm voice to low pitched voice when asked about salary and benefits he/she has been offered by the other organization. This according to the concerned HR Manager was the clear reflection of the lack of confidence the employee had in revealing how much he/she has been offered at their new job.

It was also revealed that for certain questions asked during the Exit Interviews, some departing employees did not make direct eye contacts with the HR personnel while providing their responses. Most of the HR managers agreed that if non verbal cues are carefully observed and analyzed, it could be easily identified when a concerned employee was lying or was making up with his or her responses during the exit interviews as their facial expressions and body movements did not match with what they were saying as part of their feedback to questions asked.

In addition to, when the HR Managers were asked why they were not as active in conducting Exit Interviews and were overlooking this important HR process over others in their respective organizations, an overwhelming 53% stated that it was not mandatory for them to conduct Exit Interviews as their organizations HR policies were silent in this regard. However they all agreed that if Exit Interviews were incorporated into their organizations HR policies they would consider implement this HR process from the day their policy comes into effect.

37% of the HR Managers/Personnel stated that they waited for a directive from senior management to conduct exit interviews. This usually resulted in late approvals being granted or in most of the cases, the Senior management had made up their mind to let the individual employee go as conducting exit interview for a staff that has already handed his/her resignation would not make any difference. 7% of the HR managers stated cost as a factor for not conducting exit interviews and 4% stated that they did not have time as there were other important HR activities that needed urgent attention.

The following are some of the advantages that the HR managers who conducted exit interviews with their departing employees revealed:

1. In certain cases the HR managers were successful in convincing employees in staying back. (*Excluding those who were resigning for medical, study, marriage and migration grounds*). This ultimately meant that the organization would not have to spend effort, energy, time and resources in recruiting and providing training to a new employee.
2. Preventing staff turnover meant good staff morale within the organization and a good sense of belongingness. Low staff turnover also created good public image of the organization to the shareholders and the broader community.
3. By conducting exit interviews with departing employees HR managers were able to know the root cause of staff departure. Wherever any loop holes were identified such as poor working condition, lack of training and development opportunities etc, the HR manager was successfully able to divert its attention to all such areas. This helped prevented other employees from leaving.
4. Exit interviews in general helped save time and money for the organization by avoiding productivity losses that would have been brought about with staff departure. It also helped avoid loss of productive hours.
5. It helps organizations to uncover some underlying issues, when an employee resigns and is not under any legal or contractual obligations, he/she may reveal all such hidden details (*positive and negative*) that the organizations would not have been uncovered otherwise.
6. The organization will not have to patch up the group/team dynamics or redistribute work to employees which is usually done when an employee abruptly leaves halfway into their allocated work, activity or project. Sudden departure of staff would mean additional share of workload and stress for existing staff through vertical loading or horizontal loading.
7. By conducting exit interviews it automatically reduces the risk of future industrial actions being taken by the departing employee as exit interviews provide a good platform for employees to make themselves heard and organizations to provide their reasoning's. This helps create a Win-Win situation.
8. Successfully retaining employees mean that it yields maximum return on investment for all the training and development opportunities that had been provided to the employee.
9. Helps to avoid loss of skills, knowledge and expertise which may be in short supply based on labour market supply and demand.
10. Exit interviews give organization an opportunity to relook at its recruitment and selection policies and procedures and improve it to attract better quality candidates.

11. It has helped management to concentrate on other important areas of business that needed immediate attention.
12. Helps avoid loss of network that employees build with agents, customers, clients, suppliers, distributors and special skills and expertise's.
13. Gives the organization an overall indication where things are working really well and areas that needed immediate improvements and attention.

Some drawbacks identified by HR managers were as follows:

1. Organisations that had a large number of employees stated that it was very difficult for them to carry out exit interviews as it is a very time consuming HR procedure, due to this reason most organizations opted to only conduct exit interviews for staff who held managerial position over non managerial level positions.
2. The data obtained from exit interviews needs to be recorded and kept while it is fresh in the mind of the HR Manager/ HR personnel conducting it otherwise unintentionally misinterpretations may result in loss of actual feedback received from departing employees during exit interviews.
3. Some HR managers stated that employees were reluctant to disclose their honest opinions and feedbacks during exit interviews simply because they did not trust the HR Managers/ Personnel.
4. Employees mostly rated their feedbacks to questions asked during exit interviews as average or they intentionally left few questions unanswered or wrote "no comments" in their responses.
5. It was also noted that some departing employees gave an average or neutral feedback to almost all the questions that they were asked. Having average or neutral feedback for all the questions basically defeats the purpose of conducting exit interviews as the organization will not have sufficient information on hand that would be needed to make future recommendations and improvements.
6. Some HR managers stated that they found out that some departing employees made blunt accusations towards their supervisors'
7. It was identified that some departing employees gave neutral feedback for fear of either being victimized or not getting a good job reference letter from their immediate supervisors/employer.
8. Some employees had confidentiality issues despite being given assurance of anonymity and confidentiality.

IV. Conclusion

Exit interviews should be conducted for all departing employees irrespective of the position the departing employee holds and not just the managerial level positions. HR managers should not confuse exit interviews with that of conducting employee clearance as conducting employee clearance does not in any way capture the views of the departing employees that an exit interview does. HR managers should carefully do a cost benefit analysis amongst the available methods of conducting exit interviews mainly In-person, Telephone, On call based exit interviews, Paper and Pencil exit interviews and Online exit interviews. A combination of methods would yield best results especially if time, budget and distance in conducting exit interviews are constraint factors. If exit interviews are conducted properly in line with ethically and legally defined parameters it would become an important tool in helping achieve staff retention. Departing staff feedback could be used to improve the overall job content and context of employees working for the organization. Treating employees well will gain their loyalty and they will reward organizations through increased productivity

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