

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5931302>

Evidence-based human resources – The case for exit interview surveys

Article in *JONA The Journal of Nursing Administration* · November 2007

DOI: 10.1097/01.NNA.0000285157.66527.c8 · Source: PubMed

CITATIONS

3

READS

950

1 author:



[Beth A Brooks](#)

The Brooks Group, LLC Chicago, United States

39 PUBLICATIONS 364 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Shortening the New Graduate Learning Curve: Implementing a Dedicated Education Unit (DEU) [View project](#)



Community Health Worker [View project](#)



Evidence-Based Human Resources

The Case for Exit Interview Surveys

Beth A. Brooks, PhD, RN, FACHE



This bimonthly department, sponsored by the American Organization of Nurse Executives, presents information to assist nurse leaders in shaping the future of health-care through creative and innovative leadership. The strategic priorities of the American Organization of Nurse Executives anchor the editorial content. They reflect contemporary healthcare and nursing practice issues that challenge nurse executives as they strive to meet the needs of patients. In this article, the author discusses exit interview surveys that identify reasons why employees leave their organization, what may have encouraged them to stay, and what would entice them back to the organization.

Exit interview surveys (EISs) focus on identifying the reasons why employees are leaving the organization, what may have encouraged them to stay, and what would entice them back to

the organization. Organizational leaders have been conducting EISs for years from the 1950s. The first research on EISs was published in 1969.¹ At that time, much like today, employers were interested in learning more about workplace issues that caused employee turnover. Then, as now, employers would gather baseline information about why employees were leaving, implement changes to improve the work environment, and then conduct EISs to determine if changes were making a difference.

A number of challenges arise when an organization decides to implement EISs. Skilled interviewers are key to gathering reliable and valid data. Skilled interviewers help ensure that information is not distorted; former employees are willing to discuss the truth about their reasons for leaving. While the information obtained is retrospective, there is the ever-present threat that the former employee may lie or distort the facts. Likewise, interviews conducted by staff associated with management tend to elicit biased responses, whereas if managers conduct the interviews, they may not be completely objective.^{2,3}

For these reasons, EISs are most successful when conducted

by a third-party vendor.⁴ A third party provides a confidential, non-biased, skilled approach to obtaining exit interview data. A vendor's solution ensures anonymity to the former employee and allows for the true reasons an employee left to be uncovered. In addition, well-designed EISs incorporate questions that are directly linked to those variables we understand cause employee turnover.⁵

Data from EISs can be collected in a variety of ways—in person, online, or via the telephone. Telephone interviews are typically conducted from 15 to 30 days after the former employees' departure date.⁴ This approach is beneficial so that the employees have time to evaluate their reasons for leaving. It is also helpful if they have begun a new job, to draw comparisons between the 2 experiences. A minimum of 10 telephone calls are made to each former employee during the day, evening, and on weekends, to ensure a high participation rate. For online surveys, it is best to have the exiting employee complete the EIS as a mandatory part of the departure process to ensure high participation. Incentives can also be used to encourage respondents to fill out the survey following their departure.

Author Affiliation: Senior Partner, Health Care Practice, JWT Employment Communications, Chicago, Illinois.

Correspondence: JWT Employment Communications, 222 Merchandise Mart Plaza, Suite 250, Chicago, IL 60654-1022 (beth.brooks@jwt.com).



Using Exit Interview Survey Data

Once a baseline is established, future performance can be measured, in many cases on a human resources (HR) scorecard. Some organizational leaders tie turnover and vacancy rates directly to a manager's pay-for-performance. In addition, many employers report HR metric data (eg, turnover rate) to any one of a number of professional organizations that collect these data, such as the American Society for Healthcare Human Resources Administration, the National Database for Nursing Quality Indicators, and the National Association for Healthcare Recruitment.

Analysis

Before beginning the analysis, it is important to determine if there is a sufficient amount of data from which to draw conclusions. In some cases, data are aggregated across a number of quarters, to have enough data. Also, because the data are reported in aggregate, employees can be assured that individual responses are not identifiable. Analysis of EIS data is completed in 2 ways. First, quantitative data are analyzed, and comparisons to previous results are made. When enough data are available, it is important to determine if changes in the results are statistically significant. If results are significant, then particular attention is paid to implementing improvements in those areas. In those areas where change is positive, it should be noted, and managers recognized accordingly. Second, the qualitative data should be reviewed, which leads to a richer understanding of issues im-

pacting turnover. Likewise, former employees will often comment on what might bring them back to your organization.

Evidence-Based Best Practices

In a recent study, Waldman et al⁶ state that turnover costs in hospitals can be as much as 5.8% of the operating budget. According to Jones,⁷ the cost of nursing turnover is 1.2 to 1.3 times a staff registered nurse's salary. Included in this turnover cost calculation are costs associated with turnover such as lost productivity during orientation, contract labor costs, overtime costs, and HR department expenses.

Management researchers are now integrating process turnover models (how employees quit) with content models of turnover (why employees quit), leading to a better understanding of interventions that work to avoid turnover. Likewise, 4 types of quitters have been identified, with 3 of the 4 labeled as "avoidable," that is, sensitive to management interventions. Among the 4 types of quitters (comparison, impulsive, preplanned, and conditional quitters), only preplanned quitters are not amenable to management interventions.⁸ Certain HR practices are consistently related to higher individual performance, organizational performance, productivity, and firm financial performance.⁹ The following are some evidence-based solutions to turnover.

Best Practice 1: Manager Skill Development

Conditional quitters are those who say "if, then." For example, "if my manager publicly criticizes

my performance or does not recognize my contribution or does not treat me fairly, then I am going to quit." Many professional associations have recognized the need for better-skilled managers as vital to building thriving work environments that foster retention. For this reason, organizations such as the American Hospital Association, the American Organization of Nurse Executives, and the American College of Healthcare Executives have identified leadership and management competencies needed for managers to be successful. These competency dictionaries can be used to create staff development and performance management programs.

Best Practice 2: Work Environment Improvements

Impulsive quitters are those who are not sufficiently "attached" to the organization to feel a part of decision making, to feel like they are a full member of the team or that their voice is heard. Often, the EIS data reveal these areas for improvement. In addition, older employees often suggest ways to improve the workload or workflow to decrease strain on joints, backs, and feet. This is not to suggest that older workers are impulsive quitters, but rather to suggest improvements are needed in the work environment to retain older workers who comprise an increasingly large number of workers.

Best Practice 3: Improve Communication

Exit interview survey data often reveal a lack of communication, both in a department and from senior leadership. Organizational



leaders who have disgruntled, unhappy workers or those who feel they have no voice or their issues are not heard by management are most vulnerable and susceptible to union-organizing activities. If communication is missing, activist workers may seek out representation by a union. So, smart organizational leaders communicate sincerely, directly, and continuously with their workers so that management learns and listens to the needs, issues, and concerns of the workers.

Best Practice 4: Realistic Job Previews

In some cases, an employee leaves an organization because what they were told about the work environment or the job did not meet their expectations. Organizational leaders should present both favorable and unfavorable job-related information to job candidates in the form of a realistic job preview. Realistic job previews are used to improve hiring fit, decrease turnover, enhance organization commitment, and improve job satisfaction and coping.¹⁰ The best way to present a realistic job preview is before making a job offer, with researchers having found that using videotaped information is most effective. In fact, some organizations include videotaped realistic job previews on their career Web site.

Best Practice 5: Rehire Comparison Quitters

Comparison quitters are defined as those who perceive the “grass to be greener” at another organization. Often the comparison quitter leaves your organization only

to realize things are not different or better at their new place of employment. Many organizational leaders implement a “boomerang” program to stay in contact with former employees. Boomerang programs use electronic or printed postcards to stay in contact with former employees. Some organizations even build a database of recent alumni to stay connected to these former employees, whereas others include an alumni section on their career Web site.

One strategy to prevent comparison quitters from even leaving the organization is to implement “Total Rewards Statements.” WorldatWork,¹¹ the professional association for compensation and benefits professionals, recommends that each year every employee receive a Total Rewards Statement that fully describes all compensation, benefits, and work-life benefits provided by the organization on behalf of the employee.

Best Practice 6: Market Salary Surveys

One issue that emerges from EIS data is compensation. Organizations can participate in salary surveys conducted by professional organizations or consulting agencies so as to have accurate, current, competitive salary data.

Best Practice 7: Conduct More Research

In some cases, EIS data lead to more questions. Leaders might consider conducting further studies that explore issues related to the orientation program and how new hires were socialized, or gather more data in a department

that is struggling with unusually high turnover.

Best Practice 8: Combine Data to Improve Workforce Planning

To more effectively use the results, combine EIS data with other studies, such as new-hire questionnaires, employee engagement, or employee satisfaction surveys to improve workforce planning.

Conclusion

Collecting EIS data is one evidence-based strategy that can be implemented to understand factors leading to employee turnover. Interventions to improve retention should be targeted to the types of quitters where management and HR can make a difference. According to Healthcare@Work,¹² “The number one driver of employee commitment in healthcare today is your organization’s commitment to retention.”

REFERENCES

1. Lefkowitz J, Katz ML. Validity of exit interviews. *Pers Psychol.* 1969;22: 445-455.
2. Giacalone RA, Duhon D. Assessing intended employee behavior in exit interviews. *J Psychol.* 1991;125(1): 83-90.
3. Hinrichs JR. Measurement of reasons for resignation of professionals: questionnaire versus company and consultant exit interviews. *J Appl Psychol.* 1975;60:530-532.
4. Branham L. *The Seven Hidden Reasons Employees Leave.* New York, NY: AMACOM Books; 2005.
5. Dess GG, Shaw JD. Voluntary turnover, social capital, and organizational performance. *Acad Manage Rev.* 2001;26:446-456.
6. Waldman JD, Kelly F, Arora S, Smith HL. The shocking cost of turnover in health care. *Health Care Manage Rev.* 2004;29(1):2-7.



7. Jones CB. The costs of nurse turnover: part two. *J Nurs Adm.* 2005;35:41-49.
8. Maertz CP, Campion MA. Profiles in quitting: Integrating process and content turnover theory. *Academy of Management Journal.* 2004;47:566-582.
9. Hom PW, Kinicki AJ. Toward a greater understanding of how dissatisfaction drives employee turnover. *Academy of Management Journal.* 2001;44:975-987.
10. Phillips JM. Effects of realistic job previews on multiple organizational outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Acad Manage J.* 1998;42:673-690.
11. Total Rewards Home. <http://www.worldatwork.org/waw/home/html/home.jsp>. Accessed June 17, 2007.
12. *Healthcare@Work*, 5th ed. Chicago, IL: Aon Consulting, Inc; 2004.

The Journal of Nursing Administration

Instructions for Authors

Instructions for Authors can be found online at the address below. To ensure that your manuscript is in compliance with new submission procedures, you should read this document carefully before manuscript preparation. All manuscripts must be submitted electronically through this system.

Please visit <http://JONA.EdMgr.com>.