EXIT INTERVIEWS: A LOOK AT AN IMPORTANT BUT SELDOM DISCUSSED HUMAN RESOURCES RESPONSIBILITY

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Introduction

An exit interview (EI) is the discussion between a departing employee and, usually, a member of a firm's or institute's Human Resources (HR) office. The broad objectives are to have an open discussion about the employee's experiences at the institute, which may be useful in improving its operations; for the departing staffer to leave with a positive sense about their time there; and to convince well-performing staff to change their decision and remain at the institute.

Although there is a substantial body of literature on carrying out EIs, my literature scan turned up nothing focused on policy research organisations or think tanks more specifically. The digital files that are readily accessible to search at On Think Tanks do not hold anything on the subject. I also admit that the chapters on staff issues in my book, Improving Think Tank Management, ignore this topic.

A broad finding from the more general literature is that EIs have the potential to provide valuable information for management, which can lead to significant improvements in management–staff interactions, team productivity, and staff retention. Still, identifying staff problems in the interviews, transmitting the information received to management, and then developing and implementing revised 'work protocols' is demanding.

The objective of this article is to inform institutes interested in establishing an EI process as an alternative to taking an ad hoc series of steps when a staffer decides to leave, and to show how institutes already running an EI process might increase its effectiveness, specifically in the case of research staff.

Beyond the professional literature we look at the actual practices of three well-managed policy research organisations (PROs) that I have consulted over the past three years for examining various management practices. Some information on these PROs can be found in the annex.

In the discussion, to guard their privacy, the PROs will be referred to as PRO1, PRO2, and PRO3. These numbers do not correspond to the order to which they are listed in the annex. The discussion also draws on relevant literature. For various reasons, not all three PROs responded to every question.

1. I sincerely thank Marlesa Adams, Tatiana Polidi, and Gina Lagomarsino for their extensive cooperation and openness in describing their organisations' practices and exploring ideas with me for this post.

Why have an exit interviews process?

Articles on exit interviews list quite a range of benefits that can result from a robust EI process. The goals for such interviews defined by Spain and Groysberg, summarised in Box 1, provide a thoughtful list identifying information that will be useful to senior management when collated with other input. It is also an extensive list, suggesting that those conducting the interviews must prepare carefully to cover all topic areas effectively in the hour or so typically available.

EI processes are particularly valued when an institute is experiencing an increase in resignations. A surge in departures can create genuine crises that are difficult to address by hiring consultants to pick up the slack. The patterns revealed in exit interviews can be critical to understanding and addressing the primary issues associated with a resignation surge.

Possibly the most important goal for the EI is getting the well-regarded staffer to reconsider their decision to leave the organisation. Given the substantial costs incurred in recruiting and training replacement staff – on the institute's internal policies and procedures as well as familiarisation with ongoing projects – it is clearly in a PRO's interest to explore the option of the staffer staying on. This topic is probably best deferred to the end of the interview, after rapport has been well-established.

Basic exit interview framework

Explicitly or implicitly, the EI process has a structure. The presence of a written policy and procedures statement gives the clear advantage of simplifying and expediting staff learning about the steps in the process, including the roles of various staff and the departing staffer's responsibilities. It also introduces the exit interview. Additionally, it clarifies a number of items including: which members of the HR office the departee will interact with for such matters as returning equipment and keys; responsibilities for staff who have signed a non-competition agreement; outplacement services if available; when the final pay check/payslip will be issued; how the institute handles requests for references; and other matters.

Box 1.
Overall goals of exit interviews

Uncover issues related to HR. Although the departee's views on salary and benefits are generally covered, other areas such as the value of annual performance reviews and availability of training support are often skipped.

Understand employees' perception of the work itself. Includes working conditions; availability of research assistant, econometrician, and editorial support; and opportunities to attend conferences and increase or develop professional skills. An additional topic for discussion is the departee's perception of equity in decisions on assignment allocations, who is included as report authors, and the order in which names are listed.

Gain insight into managers' leadership styles and effectiveness. Equips the institute to reinforce positive managers and identify toxic ones.

Learn about salary and benefits offered by similar organisations, if the departee has accepted employment at another institute.

Foster innovation by soliciting ideas for improving the organisation. Can be wide ranging. Can include possible improvements in the communications team's support for disseminating research results; the lack of opportunity for mid-level research staff to participate in meeting with clients; views on hybrid in-office and at-home work schedules; and more.

Create life-long advocates for the organisation. Treat employees with respect and gratitude at the interview. Encourage them to recommend working at the institute to those they believe would be a good fit and to come to future events at the institute.

Ask the departing researcher to reconsider their decision to leave.

Partially quoted from Spain, E., and B. Groysberg, 'Making Exit Interviews Count', Harvard Business Review, vol. 94, no.4, April 2016.

Two of the participating PROs do not have an explicit policy and procedures statement. PRO1 has some elements of one. I have not found information on the overall incidence of such documents among PROs generally. All organisations in my sample are regarded generally as well-managed. Hence, it may be that the existence of such documents is fairly exceptional. That would be unfortunate, because a statement facilitates the whole process and saves HR the time needed to explain the process individually.

An important characteristic of an EI process is the extent to which departing staff agree to be interviewed. First, at all three of our PROs, staff participation is voluntary. At PROs 1 and 2, participation approaches 100 per cent. Both report that staff are actively encouraged to take part. PRO3, on the other hand, reports about 50 per cent participation and that no encouragement is given.

Preparing for and conducting exit interviews[2]

Several characteristics of an EI process form its infrastructure. A primary feature is how the interviews are conducted: in-person (i.e., face-to-face), over the phone, or via a questionnaire sent to the departing staffer to complete. The general view is that in-person interviewing is the most effective as long as it is done well, i.e., the interviewer is well-informed about the staffer's history and performance with the organisation, and knows how to guide such interviews to success.

Proper training to conduct exit interviews is rated as a must in the literature. The interviewer needs to be patient and friendly and to listen carefully to responses, encouraging the interviewee with follow-on comments and steering them gently to stay on topic. Interviewers must avoid responding to the staffer's ideas or complaints other than to indicate that they are paying close attention. These and other tips are learned and practised with training. There are certainly some natural interviewers out there, but it is probably sensible to train those conducting the interviews as a simple requirement.

An important question is whether it should be a one-on-one discussion. Some have found that two interviewers can work very well where one is from the HR team and the other is from management – specifically the person who oversees the boss of the interviewee. The presence of the manager of this level sends the obvious message that the institute takes seriously what the departing staffer may have to say. The staffer is flattered to some extent by the manager's presence and may give more expansive responses to some questions that they would otherwise. The two interviewers agree beforehand on who will take the lead on various questions. Another option is that interviewers meet sequentially with the departee, with the management representative coming second.

2. In describing firms' experiences with EIs I have relied substantially on the article by Spain and Groysberg cited at the bottom of Box 1. Their article is based on a large sample on EIs. In 2012 and 2013 they surveyed 188 executives and interviewed 32 senior leaders. The interviewees represented 210 organisations in 35 countries. 'Many' interviewees were responsible for leading the exit process at their companies.

Our included PROs use a variety of approaches.

1. PRO3 distributes a questionnaire to departing staff. There is no follow-up interview or discussion. The same questions are asked to both research and administrative staff. To date, little has been done with the information collected. But PRO3 is in the midst of a wholesale upgrade to its EI process, bringing in externally designed software to expand and manage the process. More information will be obtained and analysed, with developments reported regularly to management. Benchmarking to other organisations is planned.
2. PRO1 uses both a survey and an in-person interview. The survey is distributed and completed before the interview. The HR interviewer uses the survey responses as input to prepare for the interview. In cases where the institute wants to retain the staffer, they are invited to a separate conversation with a senior manager.
3. PRO2 relies on an interview led by the leader of the research group to which the staffer belongs. In response to my question to the PRO about a situation where the staffer is uncomfortable with having the conversation with their direct supervisor, I was told that no one had ever asked for a substitute. If one had asked, the supervisor at the next level would step in.

My view is that some departing staff at PRO2 will edit their comments about their work experience to avoid even implicitly criticising the direct supervisor's performance – thereby diminishing the value of the information gathered.

A topic that garners a lot of attention is the question of the best time to hold the interview once notice is given. Options range between shortly after notice is given to the staffer's last day or even a few months beyond that. There is no general agreement. Most believe that workers start to 'check out' as their departure day nears – meaning that they really do not want to have a possibly difficult conversation with anyone. They will dodge any question the least bit controversial. Some argue for having the interview as soon as possible after the notification to depart is submitted and agreed, because the staffer is still engaged and more likely to be willing to argue their case in response to various questions. There is also some evidence that interviewees who participate in a second interview several months after departure, in the form of a questionnaire mailed to the departee, are likely to change the reasons given for leaving the firm – a surprising 59 per cent of respondents in one study.

PRO1 interviews are near the final day of employment. PRO2 reports holding the interview as soon as possible after notice is given. PRO3's process does not include an interview, as noted above.

Asked whether those conducting interviews had been trained to do so, PRO1 said it was not necessary but sometimes the person in HR has this qualification. None of our PROs employs a follow-up survey after the staffer's departure. Nor do any involve a senior officer such as the president or director of research participating in the interview in any way. Recall that such conversations are usually linked to trying to retain valuable staff. It may be that such meetings are taking place elsewhere.[3]

A clear preparatory task for conducting an interview is to review the staffer's personnel file before the interview. Their achievement record, as reflected in annual review results, over recent years is very important. So is information on any initiatives taken by the staffer, along with any complaints they filed and their outcome. Of course, complaints filed against the staffer are also very important to understand in case they are raised in the discussion. None of the PROs mentioned this step, but it was not an explicit question in the survey.

3. Spain, E., and B. Groysberg, 'Making Exit Interviews Count', Harvard Business Review, vol. 94, no.4, April 2016.

After the interview

The highest priority action arises when the interviewee indicates that they are willing to reconsider their decision to leave the organisation. The head of HR and possibly others are immediately notified, and HR provides management with a summary of the specific points that the interviewee made about their likes and dislikes about working at the institute.

In cases where the staffer does follow through with their intention to depart, the interviewer should still write up a summary of the discussion, flagging any issue that was not resolved or any complaints made about certain operations. Examples might include dissatisfaction that the assignments the departee received gave them less scope for development than those given to others, or not being listed in a high enough position consistent with their contributions among the authors of multi-author publications. Such complaints need to be recorded so that, going forward, HR can look for possible patterns of such complaints from those working under the same manager.

HR software that facilitates the whole EI process seems to have caught the attention of the PRO community. PRO1 employs such software and is likely to adopt a more comprehensive system in the near future, while PRO3 is in the process of installing similar tools.

Annual reports that compile information from exit interviews are particularly important. This is in part because when monthly departure rates are low, a longer period – such as a year – is necessary in order to identify patterns. PRO1 prepares a particularly strong annual report. It identifies the most frequently voiced complaints, stratified by the departees' roles and the office or team in which they worked.

All our PROs prepare monthly or quarterly reports for their management committee on resignations, stratified by individual research programmes and support offices. These permit a close monitoring of turnover rates, with a spike in a group's rate being a red light for management. Additionally, there is an annual staff report written by HR. This is a key input for discussion about and development of a staffing plan for the next year, including such items as training to be offered. In PRO1's report, the basic indicators on turnover and broad gauges of why staff are departing are supplemented with direct quotes of comments made during exit interviews, which make the points particularly clear.

Lastly, a very important question concerns maintaining the confidentiality of information on each staffer generated in the EI process. The questionnaire developed to survey the PROs for this article included several questions about this. All three PROs reported having strong safeguards in place to ensure very restricted access to personnel files generally, including those from the EI process in particular.

Conclusions for policy research organisations looking to develop or improve an exit interview process

At the end of the questionnaire completed by our three PROs were two questions about the utility of the EI process overall. One asked whether information from EIs had been useful to the management committee in adjusting its HR policy over the past 2–3 years. Two answered the question, with one saying 'yes'. The second question was about the PROs' satisfaction with their current EI set up, i.e., how well it works. PRO1 and PRO2 said they are satisfied with its performance. PRO3, which declined to answer the first question, chose the response 'the current system needs a lot of attention'. In short, it can be inferred that one of the three respondents believes the process is performing badly.

The very limited data presented here points to substantial diversity among EI processes, with PRO1's process being more developed than the others'.

Looking more broadly at the situation, the general absence in all three cases of a basic policy and procedures statement to guide the activity is surprising and inefficient. The lack of qualifications held by those doing the interviewing is also unexpected and possibly may lead to mechanical interviews that fail to identify real issues. Lastly, the limited experimentation with alternative interviewing paradigms involving two interviewers to possibly open the door to important insights – positive and negative –about personnel issues may be an opportunity lost (although it is noted that PRO1 has a senior person meet separately with the departing staffer if a highly valued worker is leaving).

A useful place for PROs to start thinking about change is to decide what should be gained from the interviews. Identify your priority goals in terms of the options listed in Box 1 or some other way and adjust your approach accordingly.

A second adjustment, perhaps for PROs with larger HR staffs, is to edit the selected interview questions to the goals defined for the interview and the staffer's particular responsibilities. For example, if the researcher has been with the institute for three years doing technical analysis and has had little contact with the communications team, questions on satisfaction with experience of the comms group probably can be skipped.

On the other hand, they are likely to be very articulate on questions about their experience working with the institute's software and IT support for analytic tasks. This includes the accessibility of those who are designated to provide support to those doing such work as well as their knowledge and attitude. I am confident that few PROs are currently doing this kind of targeting.

If needed, management could use the ideas like that just enunciated and set up a small committee to work with HR on revising the interviews – structure and content – to align more specifically with different staff responsibilities. Other staff will likely need to be consulted on specific questions to include.

Decide the conditions, i.e., when a particular goal for the interview is most prominent, under which a second interviewer will be brought in. Further decide whether the second interviewer, who is usually a more senior person from outside HR, should attend the first part of the interview. One criterion for this decision could be based on how much of the material discussed in the first segment will be clearly relevant for the second. For example, when the institute badly wants to retain the staffer it may be important for the second interviewer to listen to the issues the staffer lists, since addressing these may be the quid pro quo for retaining them.

Exit interviews can be highly valuable, as various authors suggest. At present some protocols employed may do little for reaching this potential, but there is every opportunity for PROs to commit to developing robust EI processes that achieve multiple goals.

Annex:
Participating policy research organisations

- **Urban Institute:** a 57-year-old think tank with a staff nearing 600, located in Washington, DC. It is focused substantially on social policy issues, broadly defined, and was created as part of the United States government's response to violent urban demonstrations in the 1960s. It became a fully independent private entity in 1978.

- **Results for Development (R4D):** a 14-year-old international non-profit organisation with think tank roots; it has offices and experts around the world that work on policy and systems strengthening in low- and middle-income countries. It takes the long view of successful development and collaborates with country 'change agents' – government officials, civil society leaders, and private sector innovators – to support translation of knowledge into practice and the development of relevant new knowledge. Its premise is that local leadership is central to self-sustaining change. Though not technically a think tank, R4D is included among the sample because of its innovative approaches and similar organisational considerations.[4]

- The third PRO requested anonymity. It is a 30-year-old think tank located in Eastern Europe. It is significantly smaller than the other two, with a staff of around 20. Note, though, that much of the work on developing management policies and procedures was undertaken when it had a staff of around 100. At that time, a strong HR department took the lead in devising the operation that continues to be used. Currently, there is one staffer formally charged with HR responsibilities.

4. For a statement of R4D's principles see: http://r4d.org/about/our-principles/?_ga=2.168268713.987849210.1606301519-237446072.1602841814

Literature for exit interviews: Broad list

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