

# A good exit strategy

How exit interviews can help your business **Interviewed by Dale W. Hlaves**

**E**veryone knows it's important to make a good first impression when interviewing for a job. What you say and how you conduct yourself will go a long way in determining whether you get the job.

But what about on your way out of a company? What would you tell a former employer on the way out the door and how can the employer use that information to improve the company?

"Employers have learned that, many times, someone who is on the way out will tell the employer things that they would have been afraid to say while they still worked at the company," says Sue Burnett, president of Burnett Staffing. "However, the terms the employee leaves on has to be taken into consideration."

*Smart Business* talked to Burnett about what employers can learn about their own companies and what they can do with that information.

**Do people have more to say if they leave on good terms or bad?**

If they're leaving on good terms, they are generally more than happy to share their thoughts and are actually pleased to be asked for their opinion. We have an exit interview form with about 20 questions that we e-mail to former employees after they are gone. After they fill it out and return it, I will schedule a personal exit interview with them. If they work in an out of town office, I will conduct it over the phone.

The questions include what they liked most and least about the company; what were their primary reasons for leaving and if it involved a new job, what made the new job more attractive; what they felt about the other employees in their department; did the job meet their career objectives; what they would have done differently if the manager and why and how they rated their pay and benefit packages. We also ask them to evaluate their own performance and what, if anything, they would have done differently.



**Sue Burnett**  
President  
Burnett Staffing

Next I read the responses and have them expound on their comments. I take notes and then give the results to the managers of the people that left. I get a lot of valuable information this way because we ask them their thoughts about their former managers and what they think the managers could have done differently.

**How important is the personal interview?**

The questions asked during the personal interview involve things people generally don't like to talk about. I get a lot of information that, frankly, most owners or presidents wouldn't get unless they hear it for themselves. Now, I'm not saying people are sharing every candid thought with me. I'm sure a lot of it comes through a filter, but there have been times when people have been extraordinarily candid with me concerning certain situations or people in the company. The former employees respected me and the company enough to let me know when situations existed that needed my attention. I appreciate that very much.

The bottom line is, it's best to hear it for yourself. Even if you have a HR manager do the exit interview, that manager will give you the information through a filter.

**Do the terms people leave under determine how truthful they will be?**

It depends a great deal on the person he or she is and how much he or she will open up and communicate. If someone has been terminated, you often get a 'I didn't deserve this' attitude and a lot of finger-pointing and blaming other people in the department. It's important to hear that while taking into account that the person is not speaking from a completely truthful standpoint and he or she is not viewing himself or herself honestly.

**How soon after a person leaves do you conduct the interview?**

If someone is terminated, I call them the next day if I wasn't involved in the termination. I want to hear the opinions before the terminated employee has a chance to cool down and maybe take some of the edge off of what he or she wants to say. Again, it's important to hear that because even though there is a lot of anger, some of what he or she says may be brutally honest and he or she is saying, 'This is why I wasn't successful.' Especially if you've had other problems in that same department and others that have left had mentioned the same things or people. If you've had turnover and the same individual is always singled out, then you have an issue, and you need to take action.

**Have you ever had someone's comment lead directly to a change?**

Absolutely, because maybe that comment was the final straw and we say enough is enough. Some people say that exit interviews are too time-consuming. I say if you've invested so much time and money in this person, you need to spend an hour of your time finding out why he or she is leaving your company.

**SUE BURNETT** is president of Burnett Staffing. Reach her at (713) 977-4777 or [sue@burnettstaffing.com](mailto:sue@burnettstaffing.com).

**Insights Staffing** is brought to you by Burnett Staffing