Exit interviews

Best practice guidelines for conducting and acting on exit interviews with employees.

On this page

Exit interviews are structured discussions held with employees before, or shortly after, they leave your organisation. The process, which may also be undertaken as a paper-based or online survey, enables employees to debrief and provide feedback to the agency on their working experience with the organisation.

These insights give you the chance to recognise strengths as well as areas for improvement across the organisation. You can also better shape workforce management strategies to improve talent attraction, retention and performance.

Principles for exit interviews or surveys:

- The objective of the interview should be clearly explained to exiting employees.
- Participation in the process is voluntary but strongly encouraged.
- A plan for capturing and analysing data should be developed. It should include how information will be collected, analysed and used (e.g. collated into a report for the agency's executive, and/or shared with employees). This ensures results are used properly and effectively and prevents any breach of confidentiality.
- Confidentiality provisions are clearly outlined in the agency's exit interview policy, including how the information will be collected, stored and used.
- Standard questions are asked of all exiting employees to identify and compare trends across the organisation, or in workforce segments.
- Delivery is objective and unbiased with interviews undertaken by an experienced person in-house or an external provider face-to-face or over the phone, or as a paper-based or online survey.

- Timing for interviews and surveys may vary but are commonly held soon after an employee submits their resignation, a few days before the employee's last day, or shortly after an employee leaves.
- A plan of action is put in place for the organisation to take action to improve organisational systems, processes and strategies; or to address potential workplace issues and/or claims.

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Given the diversity of government sector workplaces, individual agencies are best placed to design, develop and implement an exit interview program that suits their agency's operational and employment conditions. The purpose of this guide is to support you to do this according to best practice from within and outside the public sector.

Information from exit interviews can help agencies to assess organisational strengths and vulnerabilities, and target workforce management strategies to drive talent attraction, retention and performance.

Planning

Design principles

The program design should:

- have a clear goal and focus
- define which employees will participate
- enable the agency to identify:
  - turnover trends at an organisation or unit level and/or workforce segment
  - shifts in employee preferences
  - misalignment between employee experience and agency employee value proposition
  - systemic issues affecting employee retention
  - employee perception/observation of workplace culture
- be structured to align unique organisational, regional or business level requirements.

Data collection method

Research[1] shows that interviews and online surveys are the two most common methods to collect feedback from employees as they exit an organisation. The process of data collection and method you use depends on the unique needs of your organisation.

Potential benefits and risks of interview formats

Interview format	Advantages	Disadvantages
Interview	• *More personal* • *Collect more detailed information* • *Tailor questions based on employee responses and further explore or clarify issues raised*	• *Resource (financial and/or labour) intensive* • *Lack anonymity* • *Risk of interviewer bias* • *Difficult to accurately capture responses* • *May be challenging to benchmark response* • *Requires a skilled interviewer*
Online survey	• *Consistent administration across workforce* • *Minimal interpretation error* • *Easily benchmark (internally & externally)* • *Highlight focus areas* • *Anonymity*	• *Less personal* • *Limited customisation* • *Limited ability to prompt or explore issues* • *Limited ability to follow-up on allegations, such as bullying or harassment*

Use interviews for:

- Roles or work areas experiencing high turnover
- To focus discussion or identify root causes of workplace issues.

Use surveys for:

- Generic roles with average levels of turnover
- Seeking feedback on standard roles.

Consider using a combination of interviews and surveys if appropriate.

Research[2] suggests that the average response rate for exit surveys is approximately 20%. There is currently no comparable research on response rates for exit interviews.

You can optimise participation and response rates for exit surveys with a communication plan that helps employees understand:

- the purpose of exit interviews, how their feedback will be collected and used by the organisation
- confidentiality in the process
- time commitment required by the process.

Participation and response rates may also be higher where employees expect an exit interview and understand the purpose and process involved.

Accordingly, employee communication about the exit interview program should include:

- the purpose of the process
- information on employees who may participate in the process
- advice that participation in the process is voluntary, but strongly encouraged
- a brief outline of the process and timeframe
- an indication of who will conduct the interview
- confidentiality provisions in the collection, storage and use of information.

Regardless of the strategy adopted, exit interviews and surveys should be easily accessible to all employees, including employees with a disability.

The tool/s used should provide structured and unbiased data that:

- together with employee (engagement) surveys and workforce metrics provide an evidence-based view of the health of the workforce environment
- reflect the whole workforce, regardless of geographical location, or job role
- inform and helps the organisation to define what it has to offer existing and prospective employees
- may be collated or aggregated for feedback to the agency leadership
- can identify common and localised reasons for employees leaving

- can identify action needed to improve organisational systems, processes, policy and strategies, such as, job design, recruitment and selection systems and procedures
- reveal and link significant employee issues, such as factors that engage employees – or influence their decision to leave the organisation.

Other design considerations

A combination of closed- and open-ended questions will help you aggregate responses and identify trends and identify employees' perspective on specific issues.

The number, type and focus of questions in an exit interview or survey will depend on the agency's specific interest. Research suggests that response rates may be lower, with higher drop-off rates, if a survey is too long. As a guide, there should be no more than 25 to 30 questions.

Confidentiality

Ensuring confidentiality is an important factor influencing response rates. Confidentiality provisions should be clearly outlined in the agency's exit interview program, including how the information will be collected, stored and used.

Provisions should outline if the information collected will be shared within the organisation; in what form (for example, aggregate data) and with whom (e.g the agency executive).

Implementation

Administration

Typically exit surveys and interviews are managed by an agency's HR area, but they can be administered by a skilled and experienced person from another part of the agency, or outsourced to an external provider.

Benefits and risks of interviews and surveys being conducted by an in-house and external interviewer

	Benefits	Risks

In-house	• *Lower cost* • *Contextual and cultural understanding may enable more customisation during the interview* • *Ability to link resulting analysis to organisational context*	• *Employee concern about lack of anonymity may constrain responses* • *Potential interpretational bias due to corporate knowledge/understanding*
External provider	• *Independent and not influenced by organisational culture* • *Likelihood of greater openness and candour* • *Credibility (due to independence)* • *Ability to benchmark against other organisations*	• *May lack context or organisational understanding* • *Potential interpretational bias due to a lack of corporate knowledge/understanding* • *Potentially higher cost*

The ability to effectively capture information in exit interviews is crucial. If you are planning to do exit interviews in-house you should ensure all interviewers receive the necessary training and/or coaching to help make the interview more effective and a better experience for both the employee and the interviewer.

Timing

Interviews may be undertaken at any time after the employee notifies the agency of their intention to leave the organisation.

As illustrated by Figure 1, most interviews occur during the last week of employment.

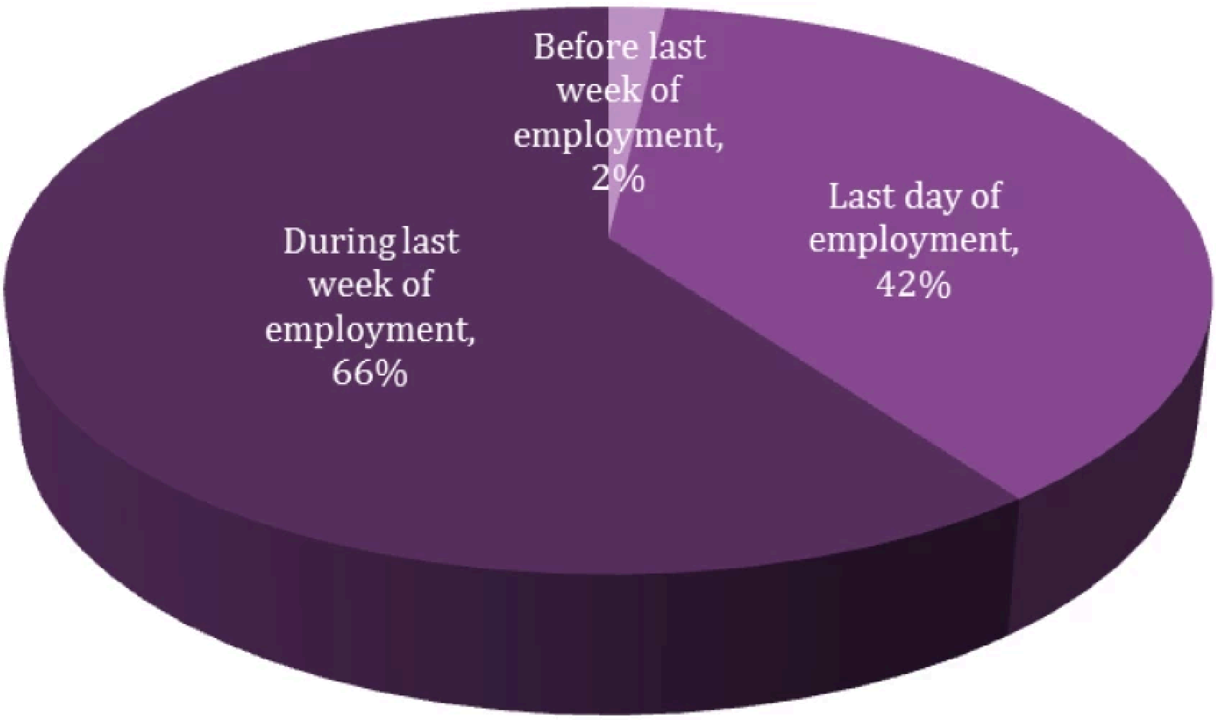

Figure1: Exit interview timing

Timing of conducting exit interviews and the benefits and pitfalls of each

	Early	Second or last day of employment	After departure
Benefits	• *Ability to address issue/s causing employee to leave* • *Opportunity to send survey reminders and follow-upon issues*	*Likelihood of honest appraisal as there may be less concern over reprisal for comments made*	*Potential for more objective feedback as employees have time to reflect on their experience with the organisation*

Pitfalls	• *Information may be less reliable if employees are disengaged during this time* • *Risk of reduced candour if there is concern that their comments may be relayed to their manager*	*Participation rates may be lower due to competing demands during employees' last days*	• *Participation rates decrease considerably the longer an agency waits post employee departure.* • *Former employees may not be contactable*

Report and act on findings

Exit interview reports may:

- be aggregated at division or organisational level to maintain confidentiality
- indicate, or provide insights, on:
  - main reasons for/factors contributing to employees' decision to leave
  - level of satisfaction with aspects of employees work experience, such as: job satisfaction, flexible work practices, career progression, salary, professional development opportunities
  - how the organisation might improve employees' working experience
  - misalignment with the organisation's employee value proposition, that is, what it says it offers employees
  - shifts in workplace trends
- be reported as part of the organisation's periodic dashboard report.

Establish a process for:

- regularly reviewing and managing issues that arise from information provided, such as, discrimination, harassment and bullying
- periodic reviews of the agency's exit interview process.

Monitor how effective the process is by tracking:

- participation and response rates
- levels of correlation with other information sources, such as, the People Matter Employee Survey
- the level of detail, or insight, provided to help the organisation make workplace improvements.