

## **Exit Interviews**

### **Introduction**

Exit Interviews are usually thought of as a rather formal interview between a manager and staff member leaving an organisation, focusing on the latter's reasons for leaving. Increasingly, however, exit interviews are a label for a specific learning process emphasising the importance of capturing and storing know-how. Obviously, it is impossible to capture all of the knowledge of any individual, but exit interviews are designed to minimise the loss of useful knowledge through staff turnover and ease the learning curve of new staff. If conducted appropriately, they can benefit both the organisation and the leaving staff. The organisation captures the leaver's useful knowledge, hopefully in an accessible form. The leaver gets to reflect on their role, and hopefully leave on the positive note of leaving a positive impact on the team or organisation. Conducting exit interviews can also be highly therapeutic, especially for staff who are leaving volatile or violent environments.

### **Detailed description of the process**

The ideal focus of the learning-based exit interview is on knowledge that is most useful to the next person, or for others doing similar jobs. Because face-to-face interactions are central to such exit interviews, ideally between the leaver and potential learners, the management of the exit interview process must be initiated as early as possible after it is known that the person is leaving.

- Identify who in the organisation might benefit from the leaver's knowledge and what they will need to know from that person.
- Consider who currently accesses the person's knowledge and what they need to know from the replacement staff. Think about documented explicit knowledge (in files, documents and emails) as well as tacit knowledge (know-how), which needs to be explained.
- Develop a plan in a participatory way to ensure knowledge can be captured and documented during the leaver's notice period. This requires a review of key tasks, drawing from a ToR in consultation with the leaving staff. An Activity-based Knowledge Mapping (Tool 8) could prove useful, providing a framework for conversations about how key tasks are undertaken, what inputs and outputs are involved, obstacles and bottlenecks, etc. Internal and external networks and other sources of knowledge should also be discussed. For explicit knowledge, the leaver should move relevant files – hard and electronic – into shared folders or a document library. Ideally, they should be clean up and organise all files and draw up a related set of notes for their successor.

### **Key points/practical tips**

- Get the leaver involved from the outset. Ask them for their inputs on how the organisation might best benefit from their knowledge, experience, contacts, etc., prior to departure.
- While HR need to be involved in the process, it may be best that knowledge-focused interviews are undertaken by a relevant peer or subject expert, as long as they are appropriately skilled and trained.

- If at all possible, there should be an overlap period between the leaver and their successor so that a 'live' handover can be done; this may need to be in the form of a temporary member of staff who acts as a 'bridgehead'.
- Exit interviews are usually only appropriate for employees who resign voluntarily or retire, rather than those who are fired or made redundant.
- There is a real need to be clear about who will use the knowledge gathered and how it will be used, before you begin to gather it; the purpose of the interview is not to gather knowledge per se but to gather useful knowledge that will actually be used.
- The less knowledge your organisation captures on a regular basis, the more it will need to capture at exit. It is possible to capture this on an ongoing basis, through tools such as Social Network Analysis (Tool 3), Activity-based Knowledge Mapping (Tool 8) and How To Guides (Tool 26).

### **Example: Exit interviews and handovers at the BMZ**

'...The need for a quality procedure for job handovers within the BMZ is made particularly urgent by the fact that staff operate as "all-rounders" and frequently change jobs within the ministry. The "all-rounder" principle means that individuals have to be able to familiarise themselves rapidly with new subject areas. The faster this process of familiarisation can take place, the faster they can become operational in their new job.

Staff statistics from 2000 and 2001 show that over 70 people in the executive and professional grades alone change job each year and must be familiarised with their new tasks. That is 20% of people working in these civil service grades. Statistically, the entire staff of the BMZ moves round once every five years. Handover procedures have, until now, varied widely and have not always done enough to ensure that knowledge is preserved.

Handovers provide a systematic basis for improving institutional learning within the BMZ, something that will benefit both the ministry and individual employees but has been lacking to date. It allows the BMZ greater productivity and continuity in discharging its duties. It also provides valuable support to staff members in tackling the special challenge of rapidly developing the skills needed when taking on a new post. ...

The quality of the handover will depend in practice on the care each individual takes over it, on the ideas they have and also on the time pressures they face when the changeover occurs. The aim of the regulation is therefore to outline a handover procedure that allows the relevant knowledge to be preserved without a disproportionate amount of working time being taken up. Clearly, however, a good handover does require time, and this should be taken into account when planning work...'

The German Ministry for International Development (BMZ) has released a summary of its experience of utilising handovers which can be viewed on the KM4Dev website: [www.km4dev.org/index.php?module=uploads&func=download&fileId=244](http://www.km4dev.org/index.php?module=uploads&func=download&fileId=244).

### **Sources and further reading**

- A useful webpage on exit interviews is [www.businessballs.com/exitinterviews.htm](http://www.businessballs.com/exitinterviews.htm).