

Stay Interviews

An Essential Tool for Winning the War to Keep Your Employees

Many firms use exit interviews to find out why employees are leaving their jobs. Unfortunately, asking an employee on their last day why they are leaving doesn't provide useful information in time to prevent the turnover. A superior approach, which I've been recommending for over 20 years, is a stay interview, or pre-exit interview because it occurs before any hint that an employee is about to exit the firm. A stay interview helps you understand reasons why employees stay, so that those important factors can be reinforced.

A stay interview is a periodic one-on-one, structured retention interview between a manager and a highly valued, at-risk-of-leaving employee that identifies and then reinforces the factors that drive an employee to stay. It also identifies and minimizes any triggers that might cause them to consider quitting.

BENEFITS OF WHY-DO-YOU-STAY INTERVIEWS

Some reasons why stay interviews have proven to be an effective retention tool over the years include:

- **They stimulate the employee:** Most employees are excited that the organization is concerned about their future and their manager took the time to consult with them.
- **They are personalized:** Unlike engagement surveys and many other retention tools that focus on what excites a large number of employees, this approach is customized to a single identifiable individual and their wants.
- **They are limited to key employees:** By having a stay discussion exclusively with your key employees who are at risk of leaving, you focus the manager's effort and minimize the overall time that the manager must devote to retention.
- **They include actions:** Unlike exit interviews, which only identify problems, stay interviews encourage the parties to identify actions that can improve the employee experience and help eliminate any major frustrators or turnover triggers.
- **Employee emotions are lower:** The discussion occurs before the employee has made the decision to consider leaving. As a result, the emotions of the employee (and perhaps the manager) are lower.
- **The manager has less time pressure:** Because the employee is not actively interviewing for a job, there is less time pressure on the manager to immediately solve the identified retention issues.
- **They focus on the positive:** Most of the interview is focused on identifying and then reinforcing the positive factors that the employee enjoys about their job. Although some negative factors may be covered, they are not the primary focus of the interview.
- **They don't require training:** Most managers can successfully conduct stay interviews without any formal training. A simple how-to tool kit is generally all a manager needs to successfully conduct these interviews.

- **They are inexpensive:** These informal interviews don't require a budget. In most cases, an hour of a manager and an employee's time are the only major costs.

TWENTY STAY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

There is no standard set of questions that must be used in stay interviews. However, you want to limit the number so that you finish the interview within one hour. I have broken the type of questions into four categories.

A) INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

1) Approaching the employee:

I want you to know that both the firm and I appreciate your commitment and the great work you've been doing. If you have a few minutes, I would like to have an informal conversation with you to ensure that we fully understand the factors that make you loyal and keep you here and any possible actions we can take to bolster your job experience and keep you happy.

2) Starting the interview:

Thanks for taking the time to have this discussion. As you are a key employee, I want to informally ask some simple questions that can help me understand the factors that cause you to enjoy and stay in your current role. During the interview, I will ask a series of questions to identify any factor that could possibly frustrate you to the point where you might even begin to consider other job opportunities.

B) IDENTIFYING WHAT MAKES THE EMPLOYEE WANT TO STAY

3) Positive stay factors:

Tell me specifically what factors cause you to enjoy your current job and work situation — including people, job, rewards, job content, co-workers, and management — and contribute to your staying at our firm as long as you have. Help us identify the factors that make you more passionate, committed, and loyal to your team and the firm.

4) Reasons you give to others:

If you have ever been asked by a close friend or have been contacted by an external recruiter, can you tell me what reasons you gave them for wanting to stay at our firm?

5) "Best work of your life" factors:

Do you feel that you are currently doing the best work of your life? Can you list for me the factors that could contribute to you doing the best work for your life? (Note: This is the No. 1 key retention factor for top performers.)

6) "Job impact" factors:

Do you feel that your work makes a difference in the company and that externally it has a noticeable impact on customers and the world? Do you also feel that your co-workers think that you make a difference? (Note: This is the No. 2 key retention factor for top performers.)

7) Fully used factors:

Do you feel fully utilized in your current role? If so, can you identify the factors that make you feel this way? Are there other things we can do to more fully take advantage of your talents and interests?

8) Are you listened to and valued:

Do your colleagues and teammates listen to you, and do they value your ideas, inputs, and decisions? How can that area be improved?

C) IDENTIFYING POSITIVE ACTIONS THAT MIGHT FURTHER INCREASE THE EMPLOYEE'S LOYALTY AND COMMITMENT

9) Better managed:

If you managed yourself, what would you do differently (to manage you), that I, as your current manager, don't currently do?

10) More positive elements and fewer less desirable ones:

Can you make a list of the elements or motivation factors in your current role that you like best and that you would like more of? What factors would you miss most if you transferred to a completely different job?

What things do you really miss from your last job at the firm? Can you also make a list of the less desirable elements or frustrators in your current role that you would like to do less of? Do any frustration factors keep you up at night, enter your mind while driving to work, or cause you to dread having to come to work at all?

11) Dream job:

If you were given the opportunity to redesign your current role, what key factors would you include in your dream job?

12) Where would you like to be:

Can you help us understand your career progression expectations and where you would like to be in the organization two years from now?

13) Challenge factors:

Can you list the most challenging but exciting aspects of your current job situation? Are there actions we can take to further challenge you?

14) Recognition:

Can you highlight any recent recognition and acknowledgment you received that increased your commitment and loyalty? Are there actions we can take to further recognize you?

15) Exposure:

Can you highlight any recent exposure to executives and decision makers you have experienced? Are there ways we can increase or improve that exposure?

16) Learning, growth, and leadership:

Can you highlight your positive experiences in the area of learning, development, and growth? And are there ways we can increase

that growth? Would you like to move into a leadership role, and, if so, what are your expectations, timetable, and concerns.

D) IDENTIFYING POSSIBLE TRIGGERS THAT MAY CAUSE THE EMPLOYEE TO CONSIDER LEAVING

Triggers are occurrences or events that drive loyal employees to at least begin considering looking for a new job.

17) Identify possible retention triggers:

If you were to ever begin to consider leaving, can you tell me what kind of triggers or negative factors might cause this? Please include both job and company trigger factors.

18) Recent frustrators:

Was there a time in the last 12 months when you were at least slightly frustrated or anxious about your current role? Can you list the frustration factor or factors that most contributed to that anxiety? Can you help me understand what eventually happened to lower that frustration level?

19) Others made you think:

If you've had conversations with other employees who have considered leaving or who have actually left our firm, did any of the reasons they provided for leaving cause you to at least partially nod in agreement? If so, can you list those factors and tell me why you considered them at least partially justifiable as a reason for leaving?

20) Past triggers:

What are the prime factors that caused you to leave your last two jobs? Are there factors from your previous jobs that you hope you will never have to experience at our firm?

FOUR STAY INTERVIEW FORMATS TO CONSIDER

If you know why an individual employee stays, you can reinforce those factors. And if you know far enough in advance what factors might cause them to leave, you can get a head start in ensuring those turnover causes never occur. If you have decided to try these interviews, these are four formats to consider, depending on your situation.

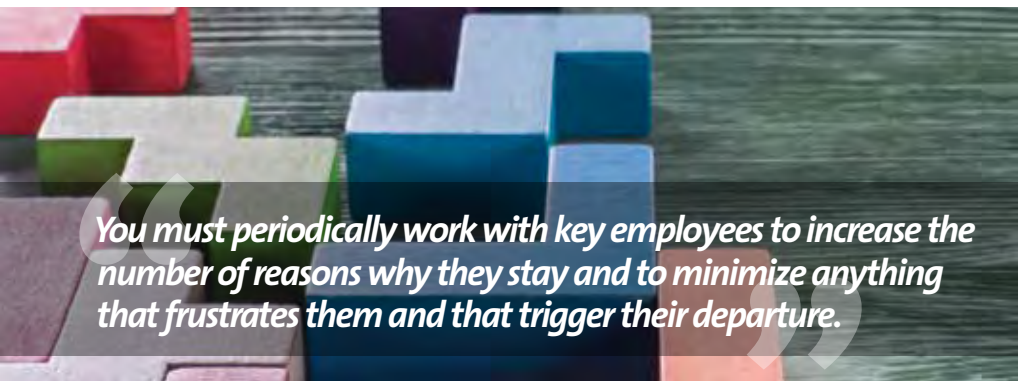
1. **One-on-one interview with their manager:** Have their manager ask the targeted employee questions during a face-to-face interview. Getting managers to talk to their own employees is such a powerful tool that this format beats the other options hands down. Skype and telephone interviews are also acceptable as close alternatives.
2. **One-on-one interview with HR:** If the employee's manager is reluctant or part of the problem, an HR professional can conduct the interview. In some cases, because they are experienced interviewers, the results can actually be more accurate and insightful.
3. **Questionnaires/surveys provided to current employees:** Providing a sample of the targeted employees with an electronic survey or questionnaire that asks the same questions in item No. 1 above is an acceptable option. This approach may be required for remotely located or shift employees.
4. **Focus group of targeted employees:** Ask a small group of targeted employees in the same job family why they stay and what might cause them to leave. Remember not to overgeneralize with group-wide stay or turnover factors.

ADDITIONAL STAY INTERVIEW ISSUES AND ACTIONS

These are additional elements, issues, and key questions.

- **When to approach the employee:** Stay interviews should be scheduled periodically, generally once a year during a slack business period. It's usually a good idea

It's usually a good idea to interview all key employees around the same time so that you can implement common actions at the same time. For new hires who naturally have a higher risk of leaving, conduct stay interviews at four and eight months.



You must periodically work with key employees to increase the number of reasons why they stay and to minimize anything that frustrates them and that trigger their departure.

to interview all key employees around the same time so that you can implement common actions at the same time. Conducting them less frequently than every two years can be problematic in periods of high turnover. For new hires who naturally have a higher risk of leaving, conduct stay interviews at four and eight months.

- **Handling possible resistance:** If an employee has never participated in a stay interview, expect some level of anxiety and even resistance simply because they're not accustomed to talking about their own motivators and frustrators. Typical issues you might encounter include: concern that you are questioning their loyalty or commitment; being uncomfortable discussing their personal feelings; not having sufficient time to prepare for the discussion; and the fact that the manager doing the interview may be a primary contributor to their frustrations.
- **Who to select for stay interviews:** Don't cover every employee. Prioritize your employees based on your estimate of the negative financial business impact if they left and the probability that they might actually leave within the next 12 months.
- **What if the identified issues cannot be resolved:** In a small percentage of cases, these interviews will bring up some major problems and issues that can't simply be easily resolved by their manager. In those cases, HR should be consulted. But if the issue cannot be resolved, a longer-term "replacement plan" as well as a shorter-term "backfill plan" will be needed in case the interview actually triggers the employee to leave.

- **Develop a stay interview tool kit:** HR must develop an effective stay interview approach that all managers can follow. The tool kit format gives managers choices, so that they can customize the approach to their own situation. The tool kit should include do's and don'ts, frequently-asked questions and answers, a directory of help services, a list of possible stay questions to ask the employee, and, most important, a list of acceptable retention actions available to any manager for improving an employee's job and for minimizing possible retention triggers.
- **Consider related retention actions:** Most organizations that find stay interviews to be highly effective should also consider implementing post-exit interviews months after an employee has left. These delayed interviews often reveal the real underlying reasons why key people left. They should also consider re-recruiting, where key employees are approached periodically with the goal of completely restructuring their job so that it becomes at least as exciting as any job that an external recruiter might be able to offer them.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The concept of stay interviews is simple: You must periodically work with key employees to increase the number of reasons why they stay and to minimize anything that frustrates them and that may trigger their departure.

If you are a manager and you think that these interviews may be unnecessary and you expect to win the war to keep your employees, you must forever bury the notion that the best employees will "naturally" stay

at your firm without your having to periodically take major actions.

Employee retention is growing as an issue because we live in a world where the minute after a manager does something to anger or frustrate an employee, the employee can react negatively by instantly applying for a new job by simply pushing a single button on their smart phone. This stay interview approach is a combination of customer relationship management and market research approaches. And by using it, HR can move retention closer to becoming a more data-driven function.

The stay interview has proven to be easy to learn and highly effective. Almost any manager can dramatically reduce their turnover rate and save hundreds of thousands of dollars by implementing this simple and inexpensive tool.

DBR

Used with the permission of Dr. John Sullivan, Professor of Management, San Francisco State University, author, and a thought leader on strategic talent management and human resource practice. His latest book, co-authored with Addie Sullivan, is *Onboarding & Orientation Toolkit: Tools That Get New Employees and Transfers Productive Faster*. For more information, email johns@sfsu.edu or visit www.drjohnsullivan.com

What is driving your employee turnover, and how much is it costing your business? Drake Synergizer Workforce Analytics provides the very best in predictive and value-driven analytics for your workforce management and can be customized to match your business needs. Contact the Drake Management Solutions Team and connect the critical data points throughout your company.

Australia: 613 9245 0245
hrrsolutions@au.drakeintl.com

Canada: 416 216 1074
solutions@na.drakeintl.com

Hong Kong: 852 2848 9288
drake@drake.com.hk

New Zealand: 0800 840 940
solutions@nz.drakeintl.com