

# Why are you still here?

When it comes to figuring out exactly what motivates a workforce, companies are often all too happy to rely on once-yearly satisfaction surveys and the colourful tables and charts they generate, which purport to be 'hard data'. But there is a more insightful – and accurate – way of discovering what makes people tick. Just ask them...



...says Dr Leandro Herrero

Exit interviews are common practice in many organisations today. When somebody leaves, he or she is interviewed, usually by the HR department, to understand the reasons and hopefully to learn one or two lessons. It sounds like a good idea. Two problems, however: timing and independence. These are linked. If the interview is carried out in the heat of the resignation, it may be contaminated by emotions. What people say at that time and what they say a month later may be a bit different. It is also natural to expect what one says to the company's HR manager and to a third party independent interviewer to be different. I have been advocating third-party exit interviews for a while with differing degrees of success.

In many instances I know, exit interviews look more like a case of the HR department ticking some boxes and recording something for the file, just for the sake of doing it, rather than a genuine attempt to understand why people have left the organisation. 'Genuine' is the key word here. It is well documented that the list of reasons given is not necessarily the 'right list' when a more thorough investigation takes place, or when independent studies are

done. Consistently over the years, the key reasons given for leaving, when examined in the light of day and independently, are related to people's direct management. Responses such as: "I can't stand him any more", "Management doesn't care", "We're not getting along well", and combinations thereof are commonplace. There are, of course, many others but these appear time and time again in research.

The official reasons given at the time of leaving, however, are more likely to be: "time to move on", "a better offer with a better salary", "a promotion to a higher position", etc. All of which may be true as well. But the timing of the exit may also have been triggered by a deteriorating interface with managers or 'the system'. The timing of when people in managerial roles start taking calls from headhunters may be determined by a combination of factors, but research suggests that the immediate management structure, and its dynamics, have a lot to do with it. Of course it would be silly to generalise, but it's equally silly to ignore these consistent findings.

In many organisations, the issue of interpreting these subtle differences does not exist. These companies simply do not carry out formal exit interviews of any sort. I wrote years ago in this column about how surprising it was that when a laptop disappeared from an office, an investigation was launched, but when a multi-thousand-dollar-earning employee left, the simple response was: "That's life." The line, which wasn't completely mine, was quoted again and again in a number of online groups that often quote this column. How true it still is today. It is perhaps more convenient to ignore the evidence and rely on assumptions. Assumptions are a great management weapon. More later.

There is another side to the exit interview coin. It is sometimes called the 'stay interview' and it is practised by a fraction of companies.

The idea is also very simple: ask people why they haven't left, don't wait until they do; ask people why they are still there and have 'decided' to stay. The question of independence, again, seems an obvious one. Stay interviews are a great way of investigating motivation mechanisms in the organisation. Why people stay is equal to what motivates them. Unlike exit interviews that are time-dependent – determined by when the individual says bye bye – stay interviews can be built in as a constant process of obtaining random samples. They should be happening all the time, and at the right dose, to be able to build up good evidence.

Many organisations use once-a-year 'employee satisfaction' or 'attitude' surveys. There are similarities, of course, between these concepts and proper stay interviews, but they are just that – similarities. Even if the practice of these once-a-year surveys is established, the issue, believe it or not, is often one of what to make of the data. Why? Because you sometimes get back a massive dossier of multicoloured graphs, the interpretation of which is far from straightforward. However, those multicoloured bars will immediately prompt management to make judgements comforted by the 'presence of hard data'.

Management, that is you and me, is very good at ascribing causality to data. Of course people say: "We knew that. The survey was done three months ago and that was at the peak of when we were dealing with problem X. Of course people complain about such and such, there is a culture here of stressing Y and Z." Give me some data and I will create the script. The topic of the value and use of those types of surveys would require a very big space. Let's just say that they may be useful tools in the context of a broader understanding of what's going on, but that they carry a high dose of risk if they are not used properly. Am I saying anything new or different from any other assessment tool? Perhaps not, but I have seen many employee satisfaction and attitude surveys being used to trigger all kinds of Pavlovian reactions, ranging from complacency to specific HR remedial policies that try to 'address' the issue and often do so in isolation from a broader organisational strategy.

So independent stay interviews offer benefits to companies because they allow them to do four things.

**1. Build a database of the truth!** I warned you before about making assumptions. We

seem to believe that we know what's going on in our organisation, but the reality is often different. Why people are part of your team may be because of the company's sexy science and technology, because it pays the mortgage, or simply because they live next door and it is convenient. Of course, it may be, and probably is, a combination. But surely you would like to know what mechanism plays what part, just in case the main motivation is the short driving distance from home to the office, so when you decide to relocate, the sexy pipeline and the privilege of working for you, put together, don't come close to compensating for the proposed new geography. The market is suddenly flooded with your supposedly safe 'unconditional admirers' – those who were at always at low risk of leaving. In stay interviews, one can ask not only why somebody is there but also what would trigger them not to be there any more. That may reveal black spots and offer warning signals.

Key to these techniques is 'building' knowledge over time, rather than relying on one-off exercises, as attitude and satisfaction surveys tend to be. Progressively, some patterns of reasons and connections will emerge. By doing this on an ongoing basis, you remove the risk of the Pavlovian interpretation and the rushed policy decision. From time to time, management would be asked to confront the data and discuss them, to see the connections between things and to understand 'the real organisation' that is underneath. Surprises and unexpected answers would then be less threatening and people would be less prone to rapid, often half-baked, actions.

**2. Map the behavioural DNA of the organisation.** Stay interviews will uncover behaviours that are common in the organisation, be they acceptable or unacceptable. They will reveal patterns in the way people do things. This is again one of the areas where management assumptions are sometimes far from reality. The organisation may have declared its values and beliefs, naming, for example, teamwork and collaboration. 'The system' – that is management plus staff plus processes etc – may feel comfortable thinking that these are present (after all, they have been declared) and indeed you may have a few examples of these happening. But it is not until a proper behavioural audit takes place – and stay

**Motivation could come from your company's sexy pipeline, or it could simply be convenience because your people live next door**

interviews are a good vehicle for that – that the assumptions may be validated. It may be that the examples of good teamwork that are showcased are, in fact, the only ones, while the organisation on the whole suffers from a lack of collaboration between people. Perhaps it is the other way around; people feel good about staying in an organisation where teamwork is widespread and that may be a real mechanism of retention. You're better off knowing this, and using it.

**3. Find out about real rewards.** One of the problems with reward and compensation systems is that they are usually very biased, if not totally biased, towards money. The only possible sophistication and enhancement of a money-based incentive programme is more money. The money is part of the reward system but, as everybody knows, only part. In fact, in any organisation, there is always a wealth of reward mechanisms, only a fraction of which are used. Many forms of individual or team recognition, such as time spent with the manager, recognition of small achievements, work flexibility, you name them, the list of things that have the potential of reinforcing the stay of an individual is huge. But it is also hidden. Until you start asking the question, of course.

If you really want to know what motivates people, ie what makes them stay, I suggest a terribly unsophisticated technique: go and ask them. And this is what stay interviews can do because you will find the answers even before you have asked the question. Conventional management practices tend to create universal systems of reward and recognition, all full of assumptions such as “shares and stock options are good for you”. One of the main assumptions that needs to be debunked, and this is an easy one because

there are plenty of data around, is that employee ownership leads to better company performance. This is simply not true, but we keep assuming that it is, and generating more and more share ownership schemes of more and more complexity.

**4. Discover the tyranny of small things.**

It is not until you actively try that you discover how apparently ‘small things’ – cumbersome processes, small difficulties, imperfections of systems, inadequate responses after requests for help etc – are, in reality, ‘big things’ that have the potential to make somebody’s stay in the organisation unpleasant. You may want to install a sophisticated information management system in a research department and, following the customer-driven mantra, you will ask your ‘internal customers’ exactly what they want. Proud of this customer-centric-service-oriented action, the CIO may decide to carry out a survey of ‘needs’ and ‘requirements’. They may expect to get requests for capabilities in complex data mining, state-of-the-art social network analysis and real-time collaborative spaces that can connect synchronically. But what they might get is: “Could you please fix the emails? They are slow and a pain, and, by the way, the new keyboards are cheap and noisy.” Normal people in normal daily life (and I will venture to call it this in business organisations) have many, say, mundane needs, the fulfilment of which, or otherwise, creates ‘tipping points’ in motivation.

In my own practice, I prefer to call these exercises ‘organisational check-ups’ rather than stay interviews, but the fundamentals are the same. It is impossible to substitute the active finding out of what’s going on in the organisation with anything better than asking people directly or indirectly and building subsequent maps of connections. Investing in this is fundamental in order to get a clear picture of what retains, or doesn’t retain, the people around you. Many years ago, somebody asked the then most prominent Spanish professor of medicine, what was the best technological piece of equipment or technological breakthrough used in the practice of modern medicine. Gregorio Marañón responded: “The chair”. Sitting next to a patient and listening was worth more to him than anything else. In management, we still need to discover “the chair”, that is, asking people and talking to them. And you have the budget.



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