HR: Invaluable feedback on exit interviews

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Exit interviews have been around for a long time. These interviews provide the opportunity for the departing staff member to give feedback about various aspects of their employment experience, often including their ideas for improvement and a discussion of the reasons for their decision to leave.

Specific questions in the exit interview process might relate to career opportunities, salary concerns, experience of working with direct managers and colleagues, the level to which the firm's vision and purpose resonated with the staff member and/or their views on the remuneration package. These interviews might be face to face, via an online survey, or both.

Critical to the value of the data is the presumption that the departing employee will be more frank and forthcoming with 'real' feedback as they exit the organisation. This information is then collated, trends identified and mined for valuable ideas for change.

Too little, too late

I believe well-structured and well-conducted exit interviews are a useful tool, however it is rather ironic that this investment of time and energy focused on an individual employee is made only when a staff member is about to leave.

How about investing regular time with individual current staff members to engage them in a discussion as to why they stay with the firm, their ideas for change and their hopes for the future as an ongoing employee?

Employee surveys may gather some of this information anonymously, but such surveys are rarely energising and tailored to the individual in the way a conversation between a staff member and their manager can be. Think about how much time is spent preparing and conducting recruitment interviews as well as exit interviews.

I believe each firm should make sure that it spends at least this amount of time in a question-listening discussion with their current employees. Face-to-face communication is powerful and prospective and departing employees should not be the main beneficiaries of this.
Extending staff tenure

At the recent World Masters of Law Firm Management seminar, the discussion turned to retention, and Nicky Wakefield from Deloitte discussed 25 per cent turnover being the near future best-practice target. Yes, the prediction is that one in four of your staff each year will leave. In some job groups (such as lawyers 1-5 years) this could be as high as 50 per cent each year.

Quite some time ago I shifted my thinking from retention of staff to extension of their tenure. Once there is acknowledgement that many talented staff are going to leave as part of their own career development, the focus can shift to retaining their talents for as long as possible, rather than forever.

When it comes to employee engagement and extension, too often the rhetoric does not match the reality when it comes to direct manager behaviour. Imagine the impact a discussion with a partner or manager could have on an employee who is at the crossroads, or a mid-career lawyer who is wondering what the career path for them at the firm might look like, or a competent secretary concerned about their remuneration and thinks the only way to address this is to seek a new employer.

There is often a balancing act going on in people's minds - working out whether the benefits of staying outweigh the benefits of leaving an employer. An employee often finds it easier to access information about their career opportunities, likely remuneration and plans for a firm's future via a recruitment interview with a prospective employer than any discussion within their own firm as people are too busy and have not made such conversations a priority.

Hopefully with a few more ‘stay conversations' you can avoid, or at least put off for a year or two, some of the exit interviews.

Staying power

Often called 'stay interviews', these conversations not only provide an opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions with your staff members, they also provide a good barometer of what is working well, allowing you to focus on these aspects in your attraction and selection processes.

Ideally, these conversations allow managers to develop a better understanding of their staff and what is motivating them to not only remain employees, but also perform at their best. The information can assist you as the partner or manager to better support them in their career development, skill attainment and productivity as you will have more in-depth knowledge of their wishes, likes and dislikes. The knowledgeable manager can link these back to the practice group or firm's goal and purpose, with the aim of creating an engaging alignment between the employee's goals and the firm's goals.
By knowing your staff better through listening and acting accordingly, managers are more likely to be able to create the working environment in which people can motivate themselves. All businesses want to have highly motivated staff working for them, and these conversations are part of creating the environment that will encourage this.

**What about performance reviews?**
The performance review and feedback processes and discussions are often dealing with measuring a person’s performance against criteria, and as such it is often not a relaxing discussion for staff.

When salary negotiations are also included in the review discussion, these discussions can colour the whole tenor of the meeting. Some firms with mature performance and career development discussions will be able to dedicate a large amount of the discussion time to what is working now, what makes the employee stay as well as focusing on the future. The perennial problem with the annual performance development process is that it is annual: a once a year event that many partners view as interfering with real work. These discussions are often deferred, rushed and/or trivialised, and concerted follow up is rare.

**Integrating 'stay conversations'**
'Stay conversations' can take place at any time. Hopefully they are in addition to the everyday discussions between partners, lawyers and staff. In my experience it helps if there is a specific time set aside as this focus is more likely to lead to effective follow up than a casual conversation that took place one Thursday afternoon.

A quarterly coffee catch-up? A career catch-up? Whatever the format, the conversation points would generally be along the lines of ‘Talk to me about what it is that keeps you working here?/ What are you enjoying the most?/ How are you and your career developing?’ There needs to be clarity about how the information will be used, and who is responsible for any resulting action. This should not be a ‘report back all detail to HR’ discussion, however practice group and firm wide it is useful to have a mechanism for capturing the trends.

A simple monthly reporting of key discussion outcomes will usually suffice. And managers need to keep their commitments to any follow up, otherwise there is a breakdown in trust. The only thing worse than not knowing what your staff think is to know, and then disregard it.

Finally it is also important for all exit interviews to include the question ‘why did you not stay?’ as well as ‘why did you go?’
As with many of these ideas, firms know what they need to do, however getting the right people to focus on doing these things is the challenge. This is a topic for next time!

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