

HR AND EMPLOYMENT LAW IN EDUCATION

Exit interviews: guidance and questions to ask

Exit interviews are used to learn the reasons for a person's departure and gain information that can be used to improve an organisation. **Josephine Smith** offers advice for conducting them.

Exit interviews are carried out with departing employees, whether teaching or support staff, just before they leave. From the school's perspective, the aim of the interview is to learn reasons for the person's departure, on the basis that criticism is a helpful driver for school improvement.

The reason that companies of any kind have exit interviews is to gain valuable information which can be useful in all aspects of the work environment, such as:

- organisational culture
- day to day concerns
- processes
- issues around management style
- workplace ethics
- employee morale.

An interview is only likely to be productive if the questions asked are well considered and likely to shed light on the organisation in a purposeful way. Like any survey, answers can be uncomfortable reading as well as a source of reassurance, so give plenty of thought to what you might ask.

It's a good idea to keep questions fairly generic so colleagues can't interpret them as divisive, pointed or overly personal.



The questions below could apply equally to teaching or support staff and are general enough to ask any colleague, whatever their role or experience, but specific enough for them to provide insightful answers that will bear witness to their experience of working in the school.

Hold the interview as close to the penultimate day of their time with you as possible, but schedule it at least one to two weeks beforehand, with a clear explanation of its purpose. That way answers will be honest (what is there to lose, after all?) and considered.

An interview on a last day, just before walking out of the door for the last time, wouldn't be great timing and may lead to hurried responses.

Questions to ask

1. Why are you leaving your current job?

Ask this question to identify whether there was a single event that prompted a colleague's departure, such as a falling out with a manager or a colleague. If there are a range of factors, you may want to track trends over time from departing colleagues. You will also want to know if the job is going to be problematic for a successor in any way.

2. Do you think you were adequately equipped to do your job well?

This is a good way to test your school CPD systems and to ensure you are looking for the right qualifications and experience in a replacement. You will also find out how effective resourcing is at your school or whether tight budgetary constraints or cutbacks are impacting directly on a colleague's ability to do their job. It might be that a lack of clear lines of communication is responsible. If this is true, the problem will need addressing for any replacement.

3. What was your relationship with your line manager like?



The relationship between a member of staff and their line manager is likely to influence a colleague's day to day working life. You can make this question easier to answer if you break it down into subsidiary questions.

- What did your line manager do well?
- What do you think they could have done better?
- What did you think of their line management style?

4. What was the biggest factor that led you to accept your new job?

This question allows you insights into other schools and what makes them more attractive at this point to your departing colleague. Their answer might be as simple as the fact that promotion and a pay rise was available. This in itself won't make you review the pay structures in your school, and you can't always invent promotion posts, but a colleague taking a sideways move on similar pay will be able to provide other reasons for leaving.

They may feel the employment 'package' is better elsewhere which could lead you to look at the terms and conditions you are offering employees, aside from their pay. Perhaps something about the school culture really appealed to your departing colleague. It would be good to ask them to articulate this as any information helps you be aware of your 'competitors', especially if that's the school down the road that several of your staff have left you for.

5. What did you like most about your job?

While you want (and need) to hear about what is attracting your colleague away from their position in your school, you also want to collect information about what was going well.

Whether it was a part of the role, relationships with colleagues, or access to free Zumba classes after school on a Friday, you want to know what made your departing colleague feel positive when they came into work each week. This knowledge helps you not only continue to expand on these positives, but also to advertise the positives when recruiting in the future.



6. What did you dislike most about your job?

Perhaps you will be told the workload is excessive, or that teaching wasn't what they thought it would be. Maybe you'll be told things you feel are true of any school, not just yours.

You may be able to influence such factors however, and if successive teachers tell you they can't keep up with the marking workload, or more than one member of a support staff team tell you that they can't deal with the management style of their manager, perhaps it's time to review your school marking and feedback policy or provide some swift training for the manager.

7. What skills and qualifications do you think we need to look for in a replacement for your role?

You need to know what qualities to look for in a replacement and a departing colleague is best placed to provide insights into what it takes to do their job well. This can be some of the most helpful information to glean from an exit interview. For example, the answers may prompt you to review and update the job description of their replacement.

Job descriptions are often rolled over from appointment to appointment and the departing colleague can easily tell you if the responsibilities listed are still relevant or need amending to better reflect the role.

Who should ask the questions?

The questions should be asked by someone senior to the person departing but not by their line manager (for obvious reasons if you look at question three above). This could be the headteacher or the school business or HR manager. Alternatively, it could be someone perceived as being a little more distant from the day to day operation of the school.

You might consider asking a governor to ask the questions or headteachers working collaboratively might provide the service for each other in their respective schools.



Using the findings

Answers from one exit interview will only tell you so much about the organisation you are leading. Like most 'data' it is most useful if it is triangulated with other information.

- What are other staff surveys taken by existing employees telling you?
- What other information do you hold about the departing member of staff's motivations, successes and impact?
- Are there any trends running through a series of exit interviews with different staff, or groups of staff performing similar roles?

Final tips

It's worth remembering that an exit interview might be a nerve-wracking experience for a departing colleague who may not want to burn any bridges or land any other colleagues in trouble!

Explain the rationale for the interview to them and consider sharing the questions in advance. A colleague may feel more comfortable answering the questions if they have had time to consider them beforehand.

I would warn against just giving them a paper copy of the questions to complete though. Part of the purpose of an exit interview is to show all your colleagues that you value their contribution to the school and want to learn from their experiences and insights. This is done with most sincerity face to face.

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