

Stay Interviews: An Essential Tool For Winning ‘The War To Keep Your Employees’

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The complete guide on how to use stay interviews to improve retention

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

Definition: 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.

The Many Benefits of Why-do-You-Stay? Interviews

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

- **They stimulate the employee** — most employees are excited simply by the fact that the organization is concerned about their future and that their manager took the time to consult with them.
- **Personalized** — unlike engagement surveys and many other retention tools that are focused 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 you minimize the overall time that the manager must devote to retention.
- **They include actions** — unlike exit interviews, which only identify problems, stay interviews also encourage the parties to identify actions that can improve the employee experience and actions that can help eliminate any major frustrators or turnover triggers.
- **Lower employee emotions** — 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.
- **Low time pressure on the manager** — 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.
- **A 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 toolkit” is generally all that 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 cost factors.

20 Possible Stay-interview Questions to Consider

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

A) Introductory questions

1. **Approaching the employee** — approach the targeted employee during a lull period and use an introductory statement something along this line. "I want you to know that both I and the firm appreciate your commitment to the firm and the great work that you have 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 that keep you here, and any possible actions that we can take to bolster your job experience and to keep you happy."
2. **Starting the interview** — start the interview with a simple introductory statement like the following. "Thanks for taking the time to have this discussion. As one of our key employees, I want to informally pose some simple questions that can help me to understand the factors that cause you to enjoy and stay in your current role. During the interview I will also use a series of questions in order to identify any factor that could possibly frustrate you to the point where you might even begin to consider other job opportunities."

B) Identify the factors that make the employee want to stay

1. **Positive stay factors** — tell me specifically, what factors cause you to enjoy your current job and work situation (including people, job, rewards, job content, coworkers, management etc.), and as a result, they 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.
2. **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?
3. **"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 for your life?" (Note: this is the No. 1 key retention factor for top performers)
4. **"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 coworkers think that you make a difference? (Note: this is the No.2 key retention factor for top performers.)
5. **Fully used factors** — do you feel "fully utilized" in your current role? If so, can you identify the factors that make you feel fully utilized? Are there additional things that we can do to more fully take advantage of your talents and interests?
6. **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) Identify the positive actions related to retention that might further increase this employee's loyalty and commitment to your firm

1. **Better managed** — if you "managed yourself," what would you do differently (in relation to managing "you"), that I, as your current manager, don't currently do?

2. **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 you 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?” Are there any frustration factors that keep you up at night, that enter your mind while driving to work, or that cause you to dread having to come to work at all?
3. **Dream job** — if you were given the opportunity to redesign your current role, can you make a list of the key factors that you would include in your “dream job?”
4. **Where would you like to be** — can you help us understand your career progression expectations and let us know where you would like to be in the organization two years from now?
5. **Challenge factors** — can you list for us the most challenging but exciting aspects of your current job situation? Are there actions that we can take to further challenge you?
6. **Recognition** — can you highlight any recent recognition and acknowledgment that you have received that increased your commitment and loyalty? Are there actions that we can take to further recognize you?
7. **Exposure** — can you highlight the recent exposure to executives and decision makers that you have experienced? And are there ways that we could increase or improve that exposure?
8. **Learning, growth, and leadership** — can you highlight for me your positive experiences in the area of learning, development, and growth? And are there ways where we could increase that growth? The employee should also be asked if they desire to move into a leadership role, and if so, what are their expectations, their timetable, and their concerns?

D) Identify the possible “triggers” that may cause the employee to consider leaving

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

1. **Identify possible retention triggers** — if you were to ever begin to consider leaving ... help me understand what kind of “triggers” or negative factors that might cause you to consider leaving? Please include both job and company trigger factors.
2. **Recent frustrators** — think back to a time in the last 12 months when you have been at least slightly frustrated or anxious about your current role. Can you list for me the frustration factor or factors that most contributed to that anxiety? Can you also help me understand what eventually happened to lower that frustration level?
3. **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 that they provided for leaving cause you to at least partially nod in agreement? If so, can you list those factors and tell me why they seemed to be at least partially justifiable as a reason for leaving to you?
4. **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 again at our firm?

There Are 4 Possible “Stay-interview” Formats to Consider

If you know why an individual employee stays, you can obviously 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, here are four “why-do-you-stay?” formats to consider using depending on your situation. These formats include:

1. **A 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, this format beats the other options hands down. Skype and telephone interviews are also acceptable as close alternatives.
2. **A one-on-one interview with HR** — in cases where the employee’s manager may be reluctant or where they may themselves be part of the problem, an HR professional can be assigned to conduct the interview. Because they are experienced interviewers, in some cases, the results can actually be more accurate and insightful.
3. **Questionnaires/ Surveys provided to current employees** — providing a sample of the currently 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 actually be required for remotely located or shift employees.
4. **A focus group covering a small group of employees** — in this format, you ask a 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

This section contains additional elements, issues, and key questions.

- **When to approach the employee** — stay interviews should be scheduled periodically — usually once a year during a slack business period. 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. 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 individual employee has never participated in a stay interview, you should expect some level of anxiety and even resistance simply because they’re not accustomed to talking about their own motivators and frustrators. Typical issues that 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 dollar business impact if they left and the probability that they might actually leave within the next 12 months.
- **What if the identified issues are irresolvable?** — 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 accept responsibility for developing an effective stay interview approach that all managers can follow. Use the toolkit format because it gives managers choices, so that they can customize the approach to their own situation. The toolkit should include dos 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 importantly, a list of acceptable retention actions that are 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 impactful should also consider implementing post-exit interviews. Post exit interviews occur months after an employee has left. These delayed interviews often reveal the “real underlying reasons” why key people left. Re-recruiting is another tool that should also be considered. Recruiting is 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 act to trigger their departure.

If you are a manager and you think that these interviews may be unnecessary, and if 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 you 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.

<http://www.eremedia.com/ere/stay-interviews-an-essential-tool-for-winning-the-war-to-keep-your-employees>