

Exit Interviews: Employee Perceptions Can Help Improve Morale, Reduce Liability

Exit interviews – also known as termination or separation interviews – are utilized by many types of organizations when staff members voluntarily end their employment. By eliciting information about the work experience of departing employees, these interviews identify factors that may adversely affect job performance and satisfaction.

In the aging care setting – where certified nurse assistant turnover rates exceed 70 percent annually, nationwide¹ – exit interviews can help improve staff retention. In addition, well-documented exit interviews may assist in countering damaging legal testimony about facility conditions presented later by disgruntled former employees.

This *ALERT Bulletin* offers strategies designed to enhance the exit interviewing process in aging care facilities.

Scheduling and Format Considerations

Inform employees of the desire to conduct an exit interview as soon as they give notice. Demonstrate respect by seeking permission for the interview and asking the employee to select a convenient time within two weeks of the planned departure date. In addition, ensure that employees sign a summary statement attesting to their willingness to participate in the interview process.

Most organizations continue to use traditional one-on-one exit interviews, rather than electronic questionnaires. Ideally, the questioner should be a trained and trusted individual who is not a member of the employee's department and whose presence is therefore less likely to inhibit the discussion.

If an online questionnaire system is preferred, it should offer employees a range of possible responses, such as *always, frequently, sometimes, never* or *excellent, good, fair, poor*. Electronic survey systems also should offer ample room for additional comments.

Regardless of the format, exit interviews should be both consistent and brief, with live interviews limited to approximately 30 minutes and electronic questionnaires somewhat less time.

¹ "Results of the 2002 AHCA Survey of Nursing Staff Vacancy and Turnover in Nursing Homes." Washington, D.C.: American Health Care Association, 2003. Available at http://www.ahca.org/research/rpt_vts2002_final.pdf.

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The discussion should focus on the immediate questions of *why* the employee is leaving and *how* the facility could improve. While general queries about resident safety and workplace conditions are acceptable, refrain from gathering resident-specific information.

To earn employees' trust, the questioner should demonstrate active listening skills and an open, non-judgmental attitude. Explain that the goal is to improve job satisfaction for remaining staff by candidly discussing workplace issues and experiences with supervisors and co-workers.

To allay concerns about possible repercussions, such as a prohibition on rehiring, inform employees that the process is optional and confidential, and that their responses will not become part of their human resources file.

Analyzing Participation Rates

Participation in exit interviews should be tracked on at least a quarterly basis, as the usefulness and reliability of the survey data are determined by the size of the sample. To measure participation, divide the number of completed exit interviews by the number of resigning employees – e.g., 125 completed surveys out of 300 departures equals a 42 percent participation rate.

Administrators of aging care organizations with multiple facilities and/or business lines may prefer to track participation rates by subsidiaries, divisions or geographic regions. Wherever the average participation rate is relatively low, use audits to discover the reasons – perhaps one-on-one discussions are viewed as lengthy and awkward, or guided online systems as impersonal and irrelevant. Refine the process in order to encourage the greatest possible participation over time.

Asking Meaningful Questions

Review all questions for clarity, simplicity and appropriateness. Avoid phrasing questions in terms of emotion, as many employees will be more comfortable approaching a situation objectively than explaining how they feel about it.

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The interview should be divided into discrete sections, as shown below, and should focus on common sources of employee dissatisfaction in aging care settings. For a sample exit interview format endorsed by the Nursing Home Quality Initiative, visit <http://www.qsource.org/NHQI/Exit%20Interviews.pdf>.

The following questions are offered as examples of queries that can encourage discussion and reveal underlying workplace concerns:

General:

- What is your primary reason for leaving?
- Did any specific event trigger your decision to leave?
- What was most and least rewarding about your job?
- Before you resigned, were you offered any options for transfer within the organization?
- How could we have prevented your departure?
- Would you consider returning to work here?
- Would you recommend employment at our facility to your friends? Why or why not?

Job training and orientation:

- Were job duties clearly explained to you upon hire?
- Were your orientation and job training adequate? How could they have been improved?

Staffing and workload:

- Was your department adequately staffed? If not, what were the problems?
- Was your workload manageable? If not, what could have been improved?
- How were overtime assignments allocated, and were they too frequent?

Supervision and teamwork:

- Were co-workers generally supportive toward each other?
- Did you receive adequate support from your supervisor? Where was support lacking?
- Were there instances when your supervisor failed to trust you and treat you like a trained professional?
- Were you allowed to work without undue interference?
- Did you receive sufficient information and feedback during your performance review? How could the process be enhanced?

Human resources:

- Do you think your pay and benefits were reasonable and fair?
- What opportunities for promotion were provided?
- What continuing education classes did you find most helpful?
- Were there classes or training programs that should have been available, but were not?
- Did you find organizational policies to be fair? If not, what policies were unfair or inconsistently enforced?

Working conditions and policies:

- Would you describe the overall stress level as low, medium or high?
- How could work-related stress be reduced?
- Did anyone discriminate against you or harass you? Explain.
- Was the work environment helpful and professional or hostile and intimidating?
- What suggestions do you have to improve working conditions?
- How could communication be improved between colleagues at shift change, and between facility administration and departments?

Resident safety and quality of care:

- Are staffing levels adequate to protect residents, or is the facility chronically understaffed?
- Have you seen evidence of negligence or abuse while working here? If so, please describe.
- Does any facility equipment require upgrading or repair?
- Did you consistently have the supplies you needed to provide quality care? If not, what was lacking?
- How could the resident service program be enhanced?

The exit interview offers a unique opportunity for aging care administrators to view the workplace through the eyes of individual staff members. A focused, consistent and open interview process can generate valuable insights and suggestions for bolstering employee morale, decreasing undue turnover, improving quality of care and minimizing liability.

1.888.600.4776

www.cna.com/healthpro/



CNA HealthPro, 333 S. Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60604

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