

# Approach with caution: how to survive an exit interview | Guardian Jobs

For some reason I have always found the term "exit interview" somewhat menacing: "he's heading for the exit", "exit stage left". A bit sinister. My paranoid tendencies aside, exit interviews, like any relationship break-up, should definitely be handled with care.

Not every organisation conducts exit interviews, but good employers or those with an aspiration to be good, usually do. The reasons why companies conduct exit interviews differ. One would hope that in most cases the motive is to learn from your departure. Are there policies, processes or behaviours within the business that should be changed or lessons to be learned? Firms may also know that corporately or individually their behaviour has been less than perfect and they are seeking to appear professional and bolster their position in anticipation of the tribunal case they suspect might come their way. Not so good.

The most common reactions from employees to exit interviews tend to be polar opposites: it's either seen as a waste of time or an ideal opportunity to tell their bosses exactly what they think of them. But have no fear. Here are my tips on surviving an exit interview:

## Decide what you want to get out of it

Leaving a job can be an emotional time. You might be sad to leave, or perhaps ecstatic to be escaping. You may have had a lovely boss and you want to let the company know that they have a jewel on their hands. Or you may want to take the opportunity to help your soon-to-be former colleagues by telling HR that your manager is an idiot. Before you go into the room decide your goal for the meeting and do your best to stick to it.

## Approach with caution

There is certainly a moral case, for say, informing on a bully. And one would always hope to have the moral fortitude to do the right thing. I am certainly not advising you not to say anything. I was once conducting a search for a head of department to work with a particular director, well known in their industry. I soon discovered that this director was infamous throughout the sector for being a bully. I went back to the company and told them this. To my shock, they were not surprised in the least. They were fully aware of his behaviour and were resolved to do nothing about it. Unfortunately, this can often be the case. My point being that unless you feel very strongly on the matter once you have decided to leave, just set emotion aside and depart as gracefully and painlessly as possible. The time for the battle is over. It's time to move on. Exactly like ending a relationship. The prize in this case, however, is not the Johnny Cash CD collection but your reference.

## **Secure your reference and leave on a positive note**

If you have had a lovely time and worked with lovely people, go ahead and tell them, no harm there. But if you have had a less than wonderful experience my view is thoroughly pragmatic: it's not your problem any more. You have done the right thing for you – you are leaving. That option is open to your colleagues too. Your objective for the exit interview should be to get out with your dignity and reputation intact, to ensure that your reference is secure and that your bridges remain resolutely un-burned. It's a small world and you may well end up working at the company or with one of your colleagues again.

## **Live in the real world**

You would be right to think what you say in an exit interview should have no bearing on your reference. However, living in the real world, the manner of someone's departure can have negative consequences for him or her in the future. People talk off the record and gossip spreads. Even HR professionals can be well, er, unprofessional.

## **Resist the temptation to offload: talk facts, not opinion**

If you really do believe that you need to make the business aware of something inappropriate or detrimental just speak the facts. Rein in the tide of emotion. Do not express an opinion, just give examples. So, don't say that your boss is an idiot. Say, for example, that no one in the department has been paid correctly for six months.

## **Be happy – you are leaving for pastures new**

The exit interview is but a footnote in your career history. Exciting times lie ahead and this thought should carry you through your last days with the business.

So, exit stage left, behave yourself at your leaving do and if you remember only one thing, remember this: an exit interview is more about what you don't say than what you do.

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