

Changing the Narrative: Conducting Stay Interviews before Needing Exit Interviews

Diane Mashburn
2120 Fyffe Rd.
025 Ag Admin
Columbus, OH 43210
870-831-1510
mashburn.10@osu.edu

Teresa McCoy
2120 Fyffe Rd.
025 Ag Admin
Columbus, OH 43210
614-292-0179
mccoy.860@osu.edu

Changing the Narrative: Conducting Stay Interviews before Needing Exit Interviews

Introduction/need for innovation or idea

According to Gandhi and Robison (2021) with the Gallup organization, “48% of America’s working population is actively job searching or watching for opportunities” (¶ 1) Voluntary quit rates in the United States set a record in 2021 with over 47 million workers (Work Institute, 2022). In the 2022 Retention Report conducted by the Work Institute, researchers found of the reasons given by workers for leaving their jobs, 69% were deemed “more preventable” (p. 20). Extension has not been immune to the issue of retention and it has even been identified as far back as 2005 by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) as being an issue deserving of attention by all Extension institutes. The loss of employees not only impacts the internal organization, but also impacts the trust local stakeholders have in Extension (Vines et al., 2018). OSU Extension has experienced higher-than-average turnover across multiple job categories.

As is the case in many state Extension organizations, exit interview data are not readily available to inform the organization on why these employees are leaving. In addition, even with exit interview data, Flowers and Hughes (1973) say it has two major disadvantages: 1) it only tells you about the employees who have left the organization, and 2) employees leaving does not always mean they were dissatisfied with their jobs. They recommend employers look at why people stay in their jobs. Despite the higher-than-average turnover in the [State Institution] Extension workforce, there is a large percentage of employees who have chosen to stay with the organization. Rather than trying to understand why people are leaving, OSU Extension Learning and Organizational Unit chose to take a proactive approach and investigate the conditions that lead employees to remain with the organization utilizing stay interviews. Stay interviews provide an opportunity to identify positive conditions but also potential issues to be addressed before an employee makes the decision to leave.

How it works

In Fall 2022, twenty-two stay interviews were conducted with Extension Educators. Characteristics utilized in selection included five or more years of service with OSU Extension as a County Educator, highly rated in formal annual reviews (exceeds or greatly exceeds), and proportional representation of the four Extension Program areas. The interviews were conducted by three members of the OSU Extension Learning and Organizational Unit, who were external to the interviewees’ supervisory chain. The stay interview protocol utilized was developed from the works of Finnegan (2015) and Raison (2022), including questions on why they continue to stay with Extension, what might entice them to leave, and other questions that could help the interview team understand main motivators and how to improve conditions that would ultimately lead to reduced turnover, more employee satisfaction, and effective engagement strategies.

Stay interviews can be conducted by those outside of the supervisory chain or, as Finnegan’s original work outlines, the employee’s immediate supervisor can conduct the stay interview (2015). The purposes of the supervisor conducting the interview is to strengthen the employee-manager relationship and to allow the feedback to be acted upon immediately by the supervisor. Stay interviews are meant to be a separate process from the evaluation and review process and if they cross that line, the interview should be stopped according to Finnegan.

Results to Date and Implications

Through the interviewing, coding, and debriefing process, an overall theme of communication emerged. The need to have clearly communicated expectations by administration, by immediate supervisors and within themselves manifested in the responses to many of the questions asked during the stay interviews. Expectations not clearly communicated have led to frustration, distrust, and burnout in many of the interviewees. These observations and findings have been informally discussed but formal recommendations for organizational improvement are being prepared to present to the OSU Extension administration.

As the stay interview team continued to examine the coded transcripts from the stay interviews, more themes emerged related to a sense of commitment to and fit within their communities and the organization, as well as a sense of sacrifice if they were to choose to leave their position. Upon further research on these emerging themes, the team find connections to the Theory of Job Embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001). Extension has traditionally worked under the assumption that mission tie was sufficient in retaining employees, but job embeddedness theory calls for further examination of this assumption (Young, et al., 2013).

During the same time period in which the stay interviews were conducted OSU Extension also administered the Enterprise Trust Index (ETI) across the entire Extension organization. Findings from the initial stay interviews have been able to compliment and provide more context for the quantitative and qualitative findings from ETI to further inform recommendations and decisions for future actions by OSU Extension administration.

Future plans/advice to others

Through the sharing of the findings from the initial stay interviews with Extension administration, it is a goal to have those individuals understand the importance and usefulness of using a tool such as stay interviews to build relationships between employees and supervisors, as well as between employees and the Extension organization. In order for relationship building to occur, stay interviews will need to be conducted by the employee's direct supervisor. This individual holds power to enact change to a certain extent for an employee (Finnegan, 2015). OSU Extension plans to expand stay interviews to support personnel in light of formal and informal organizational feedback.

As noted in the "Results to Date" section, the concept of job embeddedness warrants further investigation, both as formal research and through staff development efforts.

Quiet quitting has added an additional layer of complexity for organizations. The employee stays with the organization, yet productivity and mission tie suffer severely (Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Scheyett, 2023). With "quiet quitting" being another concern, it is recommended those who implement stay interviews, look outside those who have recently ranked highly on performance evaluations. Conducting stay interviews with those at the satisfactory or "meets expectations" levels may reap as much valuable information about the state of employees as those who exceed those same expectations.

Costs/Resources needed

Resources as currently carried out:

- Time- one hour from each the interviewee and interviewer
- Software- Zoom platform and associated equipment; Transcription service (if needed)

Resources when stay interviews are conducted by immediate supervisor:

- Time- at least one hour each from the supervisor and the employee
- Travel- depending on how interviews are conducted one or both participant may have travel expenses as [State Institution] Extension supervisors are responsible for multiple counties

References

- Cohen, D. & Roeske-Zummer, K. (2021). With so many quitting, don't overlook those who stay. *Harvard Business Review*. Available at <https://hbr.org/2021/10/with-so-many-people-quitting-dont-overlook-those-who-stay>
- Extension Committee on Organization and Policy Leadership Advisory Council. (2005). *2005 report*. Washington, DC: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.
- Finnegan, R. (2015). *The Stay Interview* (1st ed.). Finnegan Institute. Laporte, IN: AMACOM-Harper Collins Leadership.
- Flowers, V. S. & Hughes, C. L. (1973). Why employees stay. *Harvard Business Review*. Available at <https://hbr.org/1973/07/why-employees-stay>
- Formica, S., & Sfodera, F. (2022). The Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting paradigm shifts: An overview of current situation and future research directions. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 31(8), 899–907.
- Ghandi, V., & Robison J. (2021). The great resignation is really the great discontent. *Gallup*. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/351545/great-resignation-really-great-discontent.aspx>
- Mitchell, T. R., Holtom, B. C., Lee, Sablynski, C. J., T. W., & Erez, M. (2001). Why people stay: Using job embeddedness to predict voluntary turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(6), 1102-1121.
- Nelms, D., Tucker, S., Spinner, G., & Mahan, W. (2022). *2022 Retention Report: How Employers Caused the Great Resignation*. <https://info.workinstitute.com/2022-retention-report>
- Raison, B. (2022, February 23). *The Stay Interview: Gain Insight, Reduce Turnover* [web log]. Retrieved August 28, 2022, from <https://fisher.osu.edu/blogs/leadreadtoday/stay-interview-gain-insight-reduce-turnover>.
- Scheyett, A. (2023). Quiet Quitting. *Social Work*, 68(1), 5–7. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swac051>
- Vines, K. A., Cletzer, D. A., Westfall-Rudd, D., Lambur, M., Hunnings, J. R., & Vines, N. T. (2018). Identifying Needs and Implementing Organizational Change to Improve Retention of Early-Career Agents. *The Journal of Extension*, 56(1), 13.
- Young, J.A., Stone, J., Aliaga, O., & Shuck, B. (2013). Job embeddedness theory: Can it help explain employee retention among extension agents? *Journal of Extension*, 51(4), 1-11.