Exit Interview and Self-disclosure: How Employees Reveal Personal Information and Feeling as They Leave the Organization

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Improving employee relations for a better organizational climate can be approached in many ways, including by focusing on those who choose to leave the organization for various reasons. One way is conducting exit interview – an exchange of information between a representative of an organization and an employee who is leaving the organization. When conducted properly, it can serve as useful tools for improving people and the organization, as well as turnover reduction and retention tactic. Hence, it should be implemented as a part of the overall human resources management process. However exit interview is questionable in many situations. It is because exiting employees are reluctant to reveal their personal information and feeling, known as self-disclosure. In this research, semi-structure interviews are conducted to former employees of an organization on their experience in participating in exit interviews. The quality and texture of self-disclosure process experienced by each individual is captured through interpretative phenomenology analysis. Findings of this qualitative research identify themes disclosed by these former employees in their exit interviews and the process they experienced. It is hope that this research would contribute to better understanding on exit interviews and on how to improve employee relationship and organizational climate.

Keywords: exit interview, interpretative phenomenology analysis, self-disclosure

According to Mitchell, Brooks, and Lee (2001), there are many reasons why people voluntarily leave organizations - or in another word, resign. Such decision falls under the broad term of turnover, defined by Stovel and Bontis (2002) as the rotation of workers around the labor market – between firms, jobs and occupations and between the states of employment and unemployment. Specifically on employee's decision to resign, or voluntary turnover, Mitchell, Brooks, and Lee (2001) view that job satisfaction and job alternatives are two major factors identified as its main causes.

When an employee chooses to leave his or her organization, some organizations engage with him or her for the last time through exit interview. An exit interview, according to Zima

(1983) and to Goodale (1982) as stated in Robyn (2006), is an exchange of information between a representative of an organization and an employee who is leaving the organization. Exit interviewees usually done to employees who voluntarily quit instead of those who are fired or laid off (Meyer & Krug, 2007). In the cases of voluntary and involuntary turnover, exit interview gives both the organization and the employee the opportunity to explore and exchange information for mutual understanding of the terms, condition and any possible options. In some cases of involuntary departure, Cox and Dufault (1996) note that exit interview gives the employee an opportunity to learn the causes and reasons for the organization's decision and any possible implication for the future. The only time exit interview is not recommended to use, according to Shlosberg (2010), is when the terminations are heated.

In general, according to Giacalone, Knouse, and Pollard (1999), exit interviews may provide information for the organization for three distinct purposes: diagnosis and strategy (to ascertain the reasons for problems), for public relations (to provide separating personnel the opportunity to raise issues that are important to them), and for personal reasons (to provide an area for personnel to voice frustration). The first objective of exit interview, as elaborated by Cox and Dufault (1996), is to inform or confirm the decision to an employment relationship. The second objective is to explore and clarify the reasons and conditions, options and terms to reach the most satisfactory conclusion. This, according to Cox and Dufault (1996) includes what type of references the employee may expect to receive, any outplacement assistance or continuation of certain benefits, effective date, severance payment, remaining vacation entitlement, transfer of insurance coverage or pension funds, et cetera.

Shlosberg (2010) argues, when conducted properly, exit interviews can serve as great tools for improving the organization. Simone (2010) notes that the information gleaned from an exit interview can be applied to solve problems that may exist within the practice. It is because exit interviews, according to Meyer and Krug (2007), offer an opportunity to find out information that otherwise might be more difficult or impossible to obtain. Exit interview can provide a good mechanism to take a hard look at how the organization is perceived, as explained Meyer and Krug (2007). Because the employee is leaving, Giacalone, Knouse, and Pollard (1999) argues that he or she should be particularly candid about presenting thoughts and impressions about the organization without the fear of repercussion that a continuing employee might feel when talking about the organization. This would make an employee to be more open and frank in their discussions about the company, according to Meyer and Krug (2007). This is considered a valuable piece of information because, according to Tyson and Schnell (2012), a current employee may be reluctant to provide such insights.

Exit interview, according to Simone (2010), also serves as an excellent retention tactic for future employees. Hence, Shlosberg (2010) argues, it should be implemented as a part of the overall human resources management process. Weber (2013) suggests that information obtained from exit interview can be entered into a database to help human resources leaders to identify trends, for example in compensation issues or whether employees are leaving in large numbers for particular competitors. Complaints about a particular

colleague or manager, according to Weber (2013), can be used for the organization to provide feedback or coaching.

It should be noted that while some departing employees might use this opportunity to be completely honest with their employers – others, however, according to Smith (2013), might be less candid. According to LaFarge (1994) in June (2009), circumstances play a role in determining how honest exiters are during their departure. As Duhon and Giacalone (1991) explain, quoted by June (2009), employee would be most reluctant to discuss topics that they feel most uncomfortable about, and more likely to openly discuss topics that they feel positively about.

Givens-Skeaton (2004) in June (2009) elaborates further that this depends on types of information with regard to the degree of sensitivity and degree of threat. In low sensitivity issues and low threat conditions, participants did not expect disclosure of information would result in harm to the departing employee. This research also concludes that participant's perceptions of sensitivity and threat did impact their willingness to disclose during the exit interview process. The average participant in this study indicated a greater willingness to disclose non-sensitive or non-threatening topics such as job context issues. This study also indicates that departing employees are less likely to discuss personal or confidential information or topics that may get them into trouble.

In the article written by Smith (2013), it states that when it comes to exit interview, the general rule is if one does not have anything nice to say, then one should lie. According to Smith (2013), one should be "honest but don't be too honest." Furthermore, Smith (2013)

suggests that one should stick to official business as much as possible, and if criticism must be provided, one should proceed with tact and caution. Smith (2013) elaborates this further – it means letting the human resources department know the positives and negatives without hurting personal reputation or jeopardizing the chance of getting the company reference. Because of these points to ponder, it is no surprise that the exit interview, according to Zima (1983), is frequently a difficult one to conduct.

Fitz-enz (2010) concludes in his research that the validity of exit interview information is certainly questionable in many situations. It is uncommon for employees to be hesitant to tell the complete truth, for fear of burning bridges. Others just aren't willing to spend the time to provide an understanding of why they are leaving. Moreover, the numbers of people who leave in a given area may be too small to provide more than a glimpse of what is happening in the department that is experiencing turnover.

If employee do not give accurate information in the exit interview, even if the information is fully utilized, attempts to reduce employee turnover based on the information will be somewhat ineffective, Robyn (2006) argues, as the decisions will be based on inaccurate and unreliable data that would ultimately lead to ineffective human resource practices. To encourage candor, Weber (2013) argues, one can assure departing employees that their answers are confidential and can help the company make positive change. Meyer and Krug (2007) suggest that the interview should be performed in a private area to ensure confidentiality. The interview should listen carefully, avoid making assumptions and avoid

engaging the person in an argument. Redman and Wilkinson (2002) also suggest that exit interviews should not be carried out by the resignee's immediate line manager, should not take place on the last day of work and should only proceed once assurances of confidentiality have been given and probably the best approach is to focus questions on ways in which the organization's management practices could be improved in the future.

From the above mentioned elaboration, it is clear that self-disclosure plays a part in determining whether one opens up during the exit interview. Self-disclosure is described by Chelune (1987) as the process of revealing personal information about oneself to another. Self-disclosure, according to Farber (2006), reflects decisions one made about the boundaries the private self and the outer world that revolves around a basic question: what elements of our private world will we express to the outer world? Farber (2006) furthermore suggests that self-disclosure involves negotiating an appropriate balance between the helpfulness of sharing a part of ourselves with another and the inappropriateness or even danger of overdoing it, perhaps sharing too much too soon. For self-disclosure to be successful, useful or even meaningful, according to Argyle, Furnham and Graham (1999), it must be carried out at the right time, in the right situation and to the right people.

In the work context, self-disclosure clearly occurs during employment interviews. It can be said that self-disclosure of personal revelations by interviewees are an integral part, and may reasonably be said, to be the primary focus of employment interviews (Tardy & Dindia, 2006). The standard script for employee interview includes a section where questions are asked about the applicant's personal, educational and work history. An in-depth look would reveal that what happens in employment interview as one starts to join the organization also takes place in exit interview as one is on his or her way leaving the organization.

Therefore, attempts to maximize the usefulness of exit interviews can be achieved by encouraging self-disclosure of the exiters. Feldmand and Klaas (1999) also show that individuals are more likely to self-disclose their reasons for departure when: (1) exit interview data are treated confidentially and fed back in aggregate form, (2) employees are protected from supervisor retaliation in the form of negative recommendations, and (3) organizations have previously fixed problems systematically raised in exit interviews.

Considering the above mentioned elaboration, research question for this writing is formulated as follow: When individuals are experiencing exit interview, how do they exercise self-disclosure in revealing personal information and feeling? This writing aims to explore and articulate the meanings and themes that emerge from the personal experience of the individuals when they disclose information about themselves in exit interviews. The writing hopes to contribute to the understanding of how employee opens up in self-disclosure during exit interview as they are leaving the organization, what information they decide to reveal or not to reveal and why, as well as factors they identify as accommodative to self-disclosure. Findings captured from this research are hoped to equip human resource personnel in organizations with sensitivity in implementing exit interview in order to gain maximum self-disclosure.

Methods

To answer the above mentioned research question, this research adopts qualitative research design, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Smith, Flowers, and Larkins (2009) furthermore explores that when people are engaged with 'an experience' of something major in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening and IPA research aims to engage with these reflections. The aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis, according to Smith and Osborn (2008), is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world in a particular context by studying the meanings particular experiences, events or objects, perceptions and states held by the participants as they are exploring their personal experience.

Tools used for this purpose is semi-structured interview done with 4 research participants of male individuals working as staff-level in their prime adulthood stage (28-41 years old) who left the same organization due to low job satisfaction and/or the availability of job alternatives and underwent exit interviews as they were leaving the organization. As suggested by Smith and Osborn (2008), a reasonably homogenous pool of participants is identified through purposive sampling. Such small-sized participants are allowed in qualitative research design, especially in interpretative phenomenological analysis, as the purpose is to capture the essential sense making of the participating subjects in details.

Face-to-face interviews are done throughout September 2013. At that time, participants are already disengaged from the organization for at least one month. Duration of the interviewees around 45-60 minute. The interviews are transcribed and analyzed. Themes explored in the interview comprises of: (1) Exit interview and reflection on how subjects felt and think when experiencing exit interview; (2) Information revealed and did not reveal during exit interview and factors influencing subjects' decision to reveal or not to reveal information during exit interview, and (3) Reflection on the experience of exit interview, whether the subjects assess exit interview as useful to the organization and themselves.

In implementing interpretative phenomenological analysis, researcher follows the key stages of analysis as proposed by Storey (2007, in Pearce, Filep, & Ross, 2011): (1) Initial readings of the transcripts in order to find coherent meaning and themes, (2) Identifying and labeling themes, (3), Linking themes, (4) Producing a summary table of themes with illustrative quotation.

In order to do so, researcher first transcribed the interviews and analyzed individually in sequences by marking relevant items, identifying emerging themes and noting connections. Constant reflection and re-examination of the transcripts was utilized to ensure that themes and connections are related to each other. Researcher also takes out particular passages to highlight the themes identified from the text.

Results and Discussion

Participants of this research are identified in the table below. Based on roles and responsibilities they carried out in the organization, all research participants experienced exit interview conducted by different representatives of the organization from managerial or human resources development-related positions. While details regarding time, venue and interviewer of the exit interviews including the manners of how interviews were done vary from one subject to another, the purpose remains similar. Subjects of this research are identified in the table below.

Table 1. *Research Subject*

No.	Name	Gender	Duration of stay in the organization
1.	Subject 1	Male	30 months
2.	Subject 2	Male	24 months
3.	Subject 3	Male	28 months
4.	Subject 4	Male	16 months

Findings of this research are as follow. Participants are asked about their exit interview experience and how they reflect on it. One first prominent theme that emerged is that exit interview is an emotional and personal moment. Subject 1 uses the word 'relieved' to describe the sense of closure of the exit interview he experienced.

All participants are aware of the intense feeling arising from the process. The participants also find that affective tone of the exit interview experience is lasting, as indicated by vivid and detailed description, not only the chronology of the exit interview but also the emotional aspects of the process. While the feeling is expressed from the description offered by the participants, the emotions themselves are varied - from relieved to upset, from positive to negative emotions, depending on the reasons of leaving the organization.

In making sense of the experience, participants relate their emotional description of the exit interview process with the overall experience of being members of the organization. The impression captured is during the exit interview, whether it is positive or negative, is then generalized by participants to conclude their personal evaluation of the organization. In other words, for them, the final call of exit interview becomes the emotional embodiment of the whole working experience of the organizations.

For Subject 3, this is encapsulated in the statement below:

"When I was informed that I was given the opportunity of exit interview, at first I was glad because I had a lot to say regarding organizational problems. Then I realized that this was all just formality. I felt this whole exit interview was just a joke… Personally, the exit interview makes me glad I left because I just did not want to spend my time working for an organization that is essentially a joke."

Regarding the information revealed in the exit interview and why participants choose to open up about it, participants reflect the notion of leaving a legacy, making it the second theme emerging from the research findings. When deciding to make their inner feelings and thoughts known during exit interviews, participants choose to share information they view as important memento, something they leave behind that the organization must know and acknowledge, must pay attention to, must act on it and learn from it and must make future improvements based on it. The information varies from positive to negative, yet it represents something of high priorities according to the participants.

Subject 2 reflects such notion of urgencies captured in the following statement:

"In the exit interview, I clearly state what I believe as the core problems of the organization that led me to the decision to leave. I don't know whether the organization can do anything about the problems, but at least I put the problems on the record to make sure they are documented. I want to make sure that I put the evidence on paper…Someday, somehow, I am sure, they will emerge to the surface."

The following statement is taken from Subject 2 that illustrates how he makes sense of the exit interview as leaving a legacy.

"I choose to be clear about the core organizational problem from my point of view because I feel I am bound by my moral obligation to tell them the truth and to put everything in writing. I feel that if I did not do that, then what is left from me as an individual? … It is part of my dignity to take a stand and say everything as it is."

In different words, Subject 4 explains how he makes sense of the information he reveals during the exit interview in the statement below:

"I work here for quite sometime and I take my part in building and nurturing this organization …By opening up my insight about the organizational problems from my point of view, I hope I can still contribute to its improvement."

On the other hand, participants also choose not to reveal certain information during exit interviews. Things they opt not to disclose are issues they themselves are uncomfortable to talk about. Participants are aware of the importance as well as the urgency of the matters to the organization. They also understand that the purpose of the exit interview is for the organization to capture what needs to be fixed. However, they choose to maintain the sense of personal comfort over organizational interests. Moreover, the element of doubt also comes to play. This relates to the emotional aspect of exit

interview process to the participants, leading to their decision to pick and choose issues to talk about based on their level of comfortableness.

On why some issues are not revealed in the exit interview, Subject 1 offers his views on his sense-making insights of the process:

"I am fully aware that I withheld some information regarding organizational problems. It is because I am not sure that it would be useful for me to reveal that particular information because I think it is either unlikely or impossible for the organization to address such concerns… I am not sure that my information would be executable in the organizational context."

Subject 1 elaborates further on the feeling of doubt, uncertainty, being uncomfortable as well as inappropriateness in his sense-making process of the reflection, marking it as the third theme emerging from these research findings. Based on his exit interview experience, this is his personal account in the following words:

"I can't help feeling uncomfortable to reveal such problems because somehow I don't want to hurt their feelings. It is because through the months I spent in the organization, I began to know them as fellow human beings and understood why they behaved the way they did and the context of their decisions… On the other hand, I am also a person who is sensitive about employee-employer power relation and also, they are much older than I am. It was difficult for me to shake that feeling away."

When they reflect on the exit interview they undertook, even though Subject 2 sees it as 'too little too late', most participants view that it is important both for their own personal growth as individuals as well as for the development of the organization in the future. Exit interview, according to Subject 1, 'puts a human face onto the organization.' On the other hand, in terms of personal growth, participants view the exit

interview is a validation of who they are as professional individuals, a positive one to some participants and a negative validation to others.

Participants however, put emphasis on how the exit interview is done. In the words expressed by Subject 3, 'it would be much better to have no exit interview at all, rather than having poor one.' Other participants confirm that the effectiveness of the exit interview is heavily dependent on the manner and approach taken in the exit interview. Subject 1 goes further by mentioning that the exit interview would be effective if it is done by a third party the subject is not familiar with.

Furthermore, even though they understand that exit interview can be useful for the organizational and personal interests, yet the temporalities of the immediate time and space context of the process impact to their comfort level outweigh their decision. This is related to the emotional nature of the process, the long-lasting perception of the legacy of information revealed during the exit interview and the importance of personal comfort on the last couple of days as members of the organization.

Subject 3 offers his insight as he makes sense of his exit interview process through his reflection described in the following words:

"I think exit interview has all the potentials to give human resource personnel high-quality information that could not be obtained during the period of time when one is still employed by the organization. How can one be completely free in describing the existing organizational problems if one still has to work there everyday?"

Subject 2 also conveys similar message, by highlighting the diagnostic purpose of exit interview:

"If I were a human resource personnel, I would document all the information gathered during the exit interview to address the problems of the organization. If certain information regarding certain individuals piles up from one exit interview to another, it indicates chronic problems in the organization."

In addition, Subject 3 highlights how exit interviews can be made effective, based on his reflection of taking one himself. Below is how he elaborates his arguments.

"When documented and analyzed properly, results from exit interview can offer such rich data to work on. If I were a representative of the organization, I would conduct the interview in such a way so the person leaving the organization would feel at ease to tell me all about the problems in the organization. I would dig for more valuable information to find out what I can do to address the organizational problems."

Going back to the research question of this writing, it can be identified from the emerging themes captured in the finding that when individuals are experiencing exit interview, they exercise self-disclosure in revealing personal information and feeling by putting emphasis on the emotional nature of the process, the long-lasting legacy of personal information and feeling offered in the interview and their comfort level assess throughout the process – all depending on how the exit interview is executed by representatives of the organization.

Conclusion

This research confirms that for self-disclosure to be successful, useful or even meaningful, according to Argyle, Furnham, and Graham (1999), it must be carried out at the right time, in the right situation and to the right people. In the case of exit interview, employees leaving the organization are disclosing

themselves to representatives of the organization, in the office setting and during work hours. The 'professional' context of exit interview is in vis-à-vis relation with the 'personal' nature of the information of thoughts and feelings to be revealed in the process. During the moments of departing from the organization, participants clearly perceived the professional-personal contrast nature that influence their decision to pick and choose things they open up as they go along the interview.

Due to the emotional nature of the process, the importance of maintaining certain level of comfortableness as they navigate this affect-toned moment and the awareness of the long-term legacy they left behind to the organization, participants make decisions as they go through the interview. It means that even though they have a lot to say, they may stick with the diplomatic cliché – if they judge the process as ineffective. On the other hand, they may have the intention not to disclose anything, yet if the exit interview process is done properly, participants may decide to open up themselves and offer valuable information to future improvement of the organization.

In his research, Fitz-enz (2010) concludes that the validity of exit interview information is certainly questionable in many situations. Based on findings captured from the description of the sense-making undertaken by the participants conveyed through their reflection of their lived experience of the process, this research argues that by bearing in mind the way participants self-disclose themselves during exit interview, the validity is very much determined by the way the exit interview is carried out by the representatives of the organization.

In other words, it is the representative of the organization themselves who are key determining factors to ensure that exit interviews information for diagnosis and strategy, public relation purposes and for personal reasons by providing an area for personnel to voice frustration. To conclude, well-executed exit interview by representatives of the organization is key in capturing issues to be improved, which serves as feedback to the organization to improve employee relations for a better organizational climate.

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