EXIT INTERVIEWS

By Marietjie Lotz

William Sitwell has the following to say about the dark and hilarious history of the resignation letter: "History is written by the winners. It's the faithful servants, the insiders, the ones who stick around, who write the official histories. They publish the memoirs, erect the statues, talk on retrospectives. Yet theirs - the official version - is never the whole story. The quitter's tale, told in resignations, farewell speeches, open letters and violent outbursts, offers a far more compelling and often a more honest version of history."

Yes many hours of contemplation goes into the capturing of reasons for resignation and yes, some of them does not make it beyond the draft stage, however, it is said, in anyway, that real value is seldom derived from resignation letters or exit interviews.

Okay, okay, okay, I can already hear some of you getting upset with this statement, but let me explain where this comes from.

The information collected in an exit interview can more or less give an employer an indication of employee satisfaction. It can also give an indication of how well the organisation performs as an employer of choice, vis- a- vis the harsh reality of a volatile labour market with fierce competition for scarce skills. But, once we have collected all the interesting reasons for exiting, what do we do with the intelligence? How does it filter through the organisation's engine room and influence the employment policies, the value chain and the return on investment status of the employer. How is the value that is derived from this investment determined?

The sad reality is that this information is rarely used to the organisation's advantage because of the uncomfortable realities which are sometimes concealed in this information and the complexity of the analyses of this information.

Human resources are extremely complex and a costly component of any organisation and therefore it should be able to determine its own value position, not only through productivity and the meeting of targets, but through continuous evolution and innovation to optimise capacity. Employees should be able to continuously reinvent themselves to stay relevant in a fast chancing and competitive labour market while bearing in mind that there is no workplace without its challenges - be it interpersonal relations, work volume, pressure, organisational dynamics or internal politics. Utopia does not exist in the workplace, which is why "work" is a verb. Throughout human history the terminology used to refer to "labour" is expressed in a metaphor of compulsion, torment, affliction and persecution. According to The Guardian "the French word "travail" (and Spanish "trabajo"), like its English equivalent, are derived from the Latin "trepaliare"- to torture, to inflict suffering or agony. The word "peine", meaning penalty or punishment, also is used to signify arduous labour, something accomplished with great effort. The German "Arbeit" suggests effort, hardship and suffering; it is cognate with the Slavonic "rabota" (from which English derives "robot"), a word meaning "corvee", forced or serf labour. In roman languages, words from the Latin "laborare" have come to mean ploughing or tilling the earth, although in Italian,"lavoro" also means work in general. The Latin meaning was

anything accomplished with difficulty and struggle". So there you have it, work is not meant to be easy, and that is why we are compensated for it.

But let me get back to my opening statement.

Annually millions in avoidable losses resulting from employee job dissatisfaction, poor management practices, a lack of advancement opportunity and sometimes personal harassment by or conflict with co-workers or managers occur in businesses all over the world. Most employees leave their jobs because they do not feel valued and this turnover has a significant impact on the state of the economy and of the employer.

Employee exit interviews are therefore an important HR management practice to monitor employee satisfaction and to make the relevant changes to facilitate staff stability. It is important to understand why an employee leaves a job and how this information could be used to avoid future employee losses. An oversupply in the labour market does not mean that everyone is replaceable.

An exit interview affords the organisation one last opportunity to engage with the employee to avoid possible litigation somewhere down the line, caused by illegal activities or by disgruntled employees. No employer can afford to have its dirty linen washed in public and litigation is costly and time consuming.

If managed correctly, the information gathered from exit interviews can influence the climate and culture of the organisation thus making changes that reflect employee opinions, and create value recognition where it counts. This also contributes towards the creation of realistic job expectations - something that has become quite a challenge for new job entrants. The euphoria of the state of the art ergonomically designed office suite with its original paintings and posh carpets can never override the effects of tyranny or intimidation that sometimes lurk behind a friendly smile and open door policy of an organisation.

Employees usually inform employers in neat and courteously crafted resignation letters (that are usually crafted by someone else) of their intended exit. These letters are seldom worth any further consideration because it rarely reveals the truth. That is why employers should be invited to have that dreaded one on one pre-exit discussion.

According to extensive research, there are basically three reasons why one would want to have an exit interview with employees before they leave the organisation:

- To determine how well the organisation performed as an employer and where to improve;
- To ensure employees leave on a good footing and with a positive view of themselves and the employer; and
- To use the last opportunity to convince deserving employees to consider staying.

But once sourced, this information cannot be left to accumulate dust on the shelf. It should be an essential part of the strategic planning process; policy development, employment practices and in serious cases - the legal processes, otherwise it is a useless and costly exercise as mentioned above that will destroy confidence in the employer and will conceal the actual question: Why?.

To respond to this question: all organisations should have an exit policy which is actively promoted in the workplace. Considering that no two organisations are the same, these policies will vary widely from industry to industry. These interviews should be extended to all departing employees-not only for voluntary resignations - because the emotions and dynamics attached to layoffs and terminations should also be dealt with in a structured way.

There is unfortunately no legal basis on which staff can be forced to participate in an exit interview, but by guaranteeing confidentiality as far as possible, it might persuade more exitees to open up to this practice. For some people it might be a cheap form of therapy. They might find it empowering to know that they are entitled to say what they feel - a form of last minute power that they could call upon if they need to do so. Sometimes there is the genuine, heartfelt tribute that leaves everyone teary-eyed. But as Potter puts it: "This version of the story isn't written down in books years later: it is told at a time of greatest crisis, in short, desperate and often quickly composed parting shots, by men and women who can no longer hold on and hope for the best."

Another employee might be nervous about saying too much and possibly burning bridges in the process because he/she rely on former managers and team members for references and networking in the future. Others do not care and are outspoken to the level where it could result in slander or abuse.

Exit interviews can be managed in a multi phased approach through formal questionnaires followed by an interview by just applying the one or the other. There are many examples of formal exit questionnaires and some organisations prefer the written feedback while others use a combination of questionnaires and interviews. There are many opinions about the benefits of the use of formal standard questionnaires, whether it should be mandatory, who should conduct the interview and how formal it should be. But all of these decisions are up to management and what they intend to do with the information. However, if one is committed to use the information to the organisation's advantage, the best method is to outsource the function in order to ensure validity, objectivity, and proper analyses of the data.

The feedback report to the employer is usually stripped of all the emotions, and kept highly professional; however, when reference is made to criminal behavior, sexual harassment, incidents of discrimination or other legal issues, the interviewer has an obligation to divulge detailed information to the employer in order to act upon it. Assuring confidentiality could also be difficult in small business setups and those with low turnover because the sources of the intelligence may be very obvious. While there is not much that one can do to guarantee confidentiality in such a situation, exitees should be informed how the information they divulge will be used, and that the employer will make every effort not to compromise their position in the process.

The maturity of the interviewer is of extreme importance for the information to add value to the organisation. These interviews by nature could become either too confrontational or too perfunctory, so the interviewer must be extremely skilled in probing for the truth. When an interviewer is not trained in active listening or is not strongly empathetic, he or she might take offense when the employee starts to vent. This could be a very emotional encounter, and the interviewer needs to be able to manage such incidence very skilfully.

While exit interviews have its place in the work environment and is part of good corporate governance, some studies have shown that the information shared might be censored thus providing a highly misleading impression of the real reasons for resignations. It was

found that exitees usually significantly downplay the extent to which issues such as ineffective supervision, dissatisfaction with management and criminal activities are affecting them.

It is against this background that the proper management of exit interviews and the critical analysis of the intelligence gathered during these discussions can make a meaningful difference in the way modern organisations are managed.

Taking the gathered information forward is also easier said than done. There are tough questions that require responsible insight before taking matters further:

How do you comply with the spirit and the letter of the laws and regulations when you have committed to adhering to the confidentiality of the information shared during interviews?

How do you apply the law of natural justice? How does the rule against bias and the right to fair hearing fit in with the duty to act fairly?

How do you maintain trust and ensure the protection of sources when it comes to divulging of information of a threatening nature?

How do you deal with mental illness that cause chaos in the workplace?

What do you do with information relating to criminal activity, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation, racism, sexism, xenophobia or incompetent management or leadership; and

Whose responsibility is it to manage the consequences that might arise from the above dynamics and who manages the structures that should deal with the information, once it is divulged?

There is a presumption in law that the rules of natural justice must be observed in exercising statutory power that could affect the rights, interests or legitimate expectations of individuals. However, it is good practice to observe these rules in non-statutory instances too.

When an action by one person does not directly affect the rights or interests of another person, there is no obligation to inform the other person of the substance of any allegations or other matters in issue. When information is merely collected to compile a report to management, there is no obligation to notify the subject of the complaint. However, if an investigation will lead to findings and recommendations about the matter, natural justice should be applied to the person against whom allegations have been made. Similarly, the person who is ultimately tasked to make a judgment call on the basis of the interview information must also provide for natural justice, by allowing the person adversely commented upon to make submissions regarding the allegations.

According to the Labour relations Act, procedural fairness has to be applied to ensure that decision-making is fair and reasonable. Put simply, natural justice involves decision-makers informing people of the case against interests, giving them a right to be heard (the 'hearing' rule), not having a personal interest in the outcome (the rule against 'bias'), and acting only on the basis of logically probative evidence (the 'no evidence' rule).

According to the Ombudsman, any person who decides any matter without hearing both sides, though that person may have rightly decided, has not done justice. Any person

whose rights, interests or legitimate expectations will be affected by a decision or finding is entitled to an adequate opportunity of being heard. In order to properly present their case, the person is entitled to know the grounds on which that decision or finding is to be taken.

However, the courts emphasise the need for flexibility in the application of the rules of natural justice, depending on the circumstances of each individual case. Depending on the circumstances natural justice may require a decision maker to:

- Inform the person whose interests are, or are likely to be adversely affected by a decision, about the decision that is to be made;
- Answer or address the subject of an investigation (at an appropriate time) of the substance of any allegations against them or the grounds for any proposed adverse comment in respect of them;
- Provide the persons with a reasonable opportunity to put his or her case, or to show cause, whether in writing, at a hearing or otherwise, why contemplated action should not be taken, or a particular decision, should or should not be made;
- Consider those submissions;
- Make reasonable inquiries or investigations and ensure that a decision is based on findings of fact that are in turn based upon sound reasoning and relevant evidence;
- Act fairly and without bias in making decisions, including ensuring that no person decides a case in which they have direct interest;
- Conduct an investigation or address an issue without undue delay.

There is a general perception that HR's role is to protect the institution from liability rather than to support the target, as though these two interests are mutually exclusive.

However, HR should be willing to look at these things in a more holistic manner. They are not only responsible to protect the institution but also to ensure that the work environment is conducive for staff stability. Protecting a workplace bully is not a strategy for protecting the institution. HR professionals should therefore have policies in place on how to address the situation and what options are available seen through the window of employee expectations.

In conclusion, here is a copy of a resignation letter, from the Forbes website, as food for thought:

James,

After careful thought and consideration I have concluded that my core values are not aligned with the dysfunctional organizational culture at [redacted]. It is time to move on to maintain my health, sanity, and overall happiness.

This letter is to officially inform you that I resign from my position as Senior Recruiter, effective immediately. This letter also serves as my exit interview.

During my fourth and final interview for the position, [redacted], VP of HR, asked me what I needed to be successful. I replied, "clear direction and strong leadership."

I received neither.

Originally, I believed the biggest challenge at [redacted] would stem from a lack of systems. However, I quickly realized that inflated egos, office politics and administrative incompetence would prove to be bigger obstacles. These dynamics are not conducive to innovation and productivity.

Due to ambiguous policies and procedures and the inconsistent application and enforcement of both, I was deprived of fair and equitable treatment. I did not receive fair pay for the work I was held accountable for, even after three requests for reevaluation of the job title and description against what was actually required out of the position. Additionally, I have been reprimanded for fabricated, unsubstantiated claims regarding my performance and behavior. I hardly think that a statement from one person constitutes a fair and thorough investigation.

Fortunately for me, I know my worth and I am very well aware of the value I bring to a team. I refuse to settle for any form of disrespect or maltreatment, particularly from individuals whose only credibility resides in their job title as opposed to demonstrated excellence and leadership.

I'm positive my experience isn't an isolated one. The turnover rates and lack of employee engagement and satisfaction are further evidence of [redacted]'s inability to attract, develop and retain talent.

I had a goal to brand [redacted] as an employer of choice in our community. Unfortunately, it became abundantly clear to me that I would be out of integrity to attempt to attract employees to such a toxic and dysfunctional work place. I refuse to convince professionals to work for a 50 year old company that operates like a start-up "mom-n-pop shop" rampant with nepotism and cronyism.

I could share more for the purposes of an "exit interview" but I have little faith that information gathered would be compiled to formulate a retention strategy.

I am returning my company credit card, fob, Verizon "MiFi" and office key with this letter.

Regards,

Fancy Frenchwood

Is there enough food for thought in this one? I trust that we will all do our bit to ensure that when we one day leave our employers, it will be a pleasurable experience.

Sources:
"F**k you and goodbye" - Matt Potter
Various Forbes newsletters
"Are exit interviews of any value - do leavers really tell the truth? "- Krystal Wilkinson
Internet articles from Michael Stephan, principal with Deloitte Consulting LLP

The Role of a Public Servant and The Community and Ensuring Quality Service Delivery

By Bawinile Tikwayo

The recent service delivery protests that have been taking place in this country have lead us to ask the following question; what are the causes of poor service delivery? But the biggest question is ''what is the role of a public servant in our communities?'' These are just some of the many questions that the citizens are asking. These questions raises the notion that the majority of the people (public and government employees) do not really understand the role of the public servant in our communities. With that said I am need to unpack the general idea of a public servant, their duties and how the public can work together with the public servants to ensure better service delivery.

A public servant is a government employee, employed to serve the citizens of the country on behalf of the state. The duties of a public servant varies from drafting and implementing government policies, ensuring law and order in communities, facilitating the accessibility of health care services, etc. In short we can say that a public servant is there to cater for the communities basic needs. The president pronounced himself on the need for a public sector cadre. Such a cadre must be a new type of public servant, who should have a caring attitude when dealing with citizens. The cadre must ensure faster, more responsive, caring and effective service delivery. They must ensure citizen and customer care especially in relation to front line services. The cadre must be able to solve problems, know where the people live, know what they think and act effectively on issues they raise.

Most of the challenges that are faced in the communities arise from public servants who does not follow the mandate of a good public servant. A good public servant must arrive at work on time; perform duties attached to his or her job description during working hours, assist internal and external customers with care and respect. A good public servant must also ensure that public service complaints are handled effectively and the rights of the customer /citizen must be upheld. There is a trend amongst some public servants to abuse service time to conduct their private matters such as gossiping, shopping, participating in social media, etc, which should rather be used to enhance service delivery. Some of the reasons that may cause public servants to be unproductive maybe the traditional low income that is funded primarily by the taxpayer as opposed to private sectors. Due to the high rate of unemployment in the country, people no longer go for the jobs they are passionate about, thus we get a lot of public servants who are not passionate about providing services to the public. Public servants can make service

delivery better by improving processes for delivering services, establishing norms and standards and to hold them responsible to provide the required services as defined in the norms and standards. Failing to comply, according to the Public Service Regulations, disciplinary action can be taken against a public servant in order to analyse their reasons for not complying.

The sub factors of the matrix approach to the public service productivity are found in labour performance, operational performance and citizen participation performance. Labour performance is the cost of labour and whether the outputs that have been set for personnel through organisational PMDS have been met in a specific time, also taking into account employee wellness (work environment) and health risk factors. Operational performances are the operating processes and systems that impact on service delivery. Citizen participation performance, are the indicators of citizens perceptions of service quality. These factors are good practice in ensuring that public service delivers on their promises.

We can always point fingers to the public servant but the community also has a role to play in ensuring proper service delivery.

The roles of communities are:

- To protect their schools and health facilities from vandalism;
- To pay their taxes;
- To report corruption; and
- To use proper channels to complain on issues that they are not satisfied with.

There are other ways that the public can participate to ensure quality service delivery such as through the development of legislation, traditional leader and imbizo and public hearings.

To achieve a better service delivery, the public sector must continuously motivate public servants by recognizing good performance. Management in the public service should apply job enlargement and job enrichment exercises. Job enlargement exercise increases job tasks and responsibilities to make a position more challenging. It is usually a horizontal expansion, which means that the tasks added are at the same level as those in the current position while job enrichment is a management concept that involves redesigning jobs so that they are more challenging to the employee and they have less repetitive work. When employees feel like they're trusted with greater responsibilities at an organisation, their level of motivation increases. As a result, employees may be more productive, better adhere to the company rules and management better, and that can also lead to less absenteeism.

In conclusion I can say that a good working relationship between the community and the public servants can result in achieving a quality service delivery.

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