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## Leaving on a Good Note

By Lisa Munniksma  
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**Completing an exit interview can be a source of closure for former employees, but it also can tempt them into making serious career mistakes.**

When your job is no longer working for you — whether you've been offered another opportunity or you simply cannot stand to go to work in the morning — many businesses will request an exit interview before you leave. Exit interviews don't usually directly affect your career, but they can be a great point of stress for some employees, especially if there are some issues or complaints you need to get off your chest.

There's a big difference between leaving on a good note and being put on the black list. Here, human resources and career services professionals give their takes on how to best handle the final farewell.

### The interview itself

Most companies complete some sort of exit interview, whether it be a simple meeting with your supervisor to return your office keys and receive your last paycheck or an hour-long conference with the human resources director to determine your reasons for leaving.

The administrative details discussed at an exit interview tie up the loose ends for the company. If done well, there should be no question in your mind about whether the company cell phone you've used for three years is yours to keep or when your vacation pay-out check will arrive.

Once the administrative tasks are done, the company sometimes will want to collect information about why an employee is leaving. This interview most likely takes place with you and at least one company representative in a private room where they'll ask you to

### What Not to Say

"It's not a confessional," says Shaun Bradley, president and co-CEO of the military-focused placement firm Bradley-Morris Inc., of the exit interview.

"By the way, I've been stealing office supplies for the last three years," is something a person might be tempted to say out of spite.

But human resources consultant Carole Kemmer, SPHR, of Kemmer Consulting Group, says, "You can probably expect something is going to happen with that." Even if your exit interview takes place on your last day, your employer still can investigate and take action on any of your comments.

Especially in the case of an employee eligible to collect unemployment, admission of theft or other wrongdoing can be a part of an employer's claim as to why unemployment benefits should be denied.

### Get in Touch with Professionals

The career planning and human resources professionals who contributed to this article can be reached via the following Web sites and telephone numbers:

Shaun Bradley  
[Bradley-Morris Inc.](#)  
(800) 330-4950  
Hallie Crawford, MA,

out your comments in writing so they cannot be misrepresented later on.

CPCC

Questions you might be asked usually are along the lines of "Why are you leaving?" or "If there were one thing you could change about working here, what would it be?" You also might be asked to talk about the company's and your position's positive aspects.

[Authentically Speaking](#)  
(404) 228-6434  
Carole Kemmer, SPHR

[Kemmer Consulting Group LLC](#)  
(765) 538-3004

Collecting this information allows companies to gauge the areas in which they need to improve their employee relations. By going through this process, they also have one last chance to foster goodwill and reduce the likelihood you will leave with a negative view of the company.

"The reality is, people leaving the company is not a positive thing. Somebody has voted with their feet, and they've voted for someone besides you," says Shaun Bradley, president and co-CEO of the military-focused placement firm Bradley-Morris Inc. So it is in the company's best interest to make the exit interview as positive an experience as possible.

If you've resigned from your job, this is an opportunity to honestly and objectively voice your reasons for leaving.

"Even if the person has submitted a resignation letter, they might have something to get off their chest," says human resources consultant Carole Kemmer, SPHR, of Kemmer Consulting Group LLC. Likewise, if you are being laid off, you can make your concerns about the company known in an objective and non-threatening manner.

#### **Off-the-cuff reaction**

During the exit interviews she's been a part of, Kemmer has seen a range of reactions from people: "Sometimes you'll have people come in and blow up and try to get the last jab in." This, of course, is not what's recommended to maintain your dignity and good reputation.

"Get yourself in the mindset of 'How can we make this a productive interview?' Make a commitment to remain positive and focused on making the interview a win-win situation," suggests career and life coach Hallie Crawford, MA, of Authentically Speaking, a professional speaking and presentation coaching service.

But remaining positive and being

concerned with the company's own productivity are challenging, at best, especially for the disgruntled employee or someone who thinks he or she has been unfairly let go.

This is where planning comes into play, says Kemmer. She recommends bringing up sensitive and negative subjects in this manner: "I felt I was treated very poorly and I want to tell you this so it doesn't happen to someone else."

Crawford agrees. "Focus on 'How can this be made better?' Offer possible solutions ... for improvement," she says. "That will help set a positive tone."

The advantage you have in an exit interview that you didn't have in your hiring interview is that you now know the company's culture. You have a pretty good idea whether management will take your words personally or use your constructive criticism to make improvements. If you think the company won't take your ideas in stride, Crawford says to ask yourself, "What's the benefit to me of providing the feedback?"

"If it is important to you, go for it. You have to be the judge. Go with your instinct a bit here. You can't beat people over the head with a complaint and make them change," Crawford adds.

Bradley likes to give the same advice for exit interviews as he does for the initial interview process: Put a positive spin on whatever you have to say. Being asked to provide blunt feedback in an exit interview is tricky. It's similar to being in an entrance interview and being asked to talk about a "bad boss" you've had in the past.

"This is where the military officers struggle: 'How do I answer that question while maintaining my integrity and being honest?' You can answer the question while being positive. There's a way to be honest and positive," he says.

If you think you're being led into a trap, you always have the right to say, "I'm not comfortable answering that question," reminds Bradley. You also have the right to decline to participate in the exit interview altogether if you fear what you say will be used against you. The administrative tasks still will need to be taken care of, but there are no legal requirements for exit interviews.

### **Burning bridges**

Before you let your comments fly, consider this: "If I had to come back and ask for a job, would what I say affect me?" says Bill Scott, director of marketing for Bradley-Morris.

Whatever your comments or complaints, the fastest way to turn off recipients is to lay the blame on them.

"Pointing fingers at the employer [or] boss can make them defensive and turn out to be less productive. Introduce your points by making it about you and suggesting what would've been better," says Crawford.

Consider also that if you snitch on other employees, there will be consequences for them. Your direct comments, whether made in good faith or negatively, can lead to others being investigated or even fired. They also can affect the likelihood of your getting a positive letter of reference from those people down the road.

While confidentiality is in order, information leaks happen all the time, both within and outside a company.

"The employer has the responsibility to not retaliate. There are laws about that. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is charged with making sure that when somebody makes valid complaints, they're not retaliated against," says Kemmer.

Still, an employer has the right to say he'd rather not hire someone again.

"Layoffs can happen at any time. What if you go to the next job and get laid off immediately? If you've gone out on a good note, maybe you'd be a candidate for another position at your old company," says Scott.

Or perhaps you'd be a candidate at the company of your boss's best friend — you really don't know who will turn up next along your career path.

### **Communication upfront**

Some companies view the comments collected during exit interviews as less valid than those that are gathered during a person's employment. An exit interview can turn into a free-for-all if an employee wasn't comfortable discussing issues with a supervisor or human resources personnel beforehand.

Bradley says, "As a general rule, I don't think there's anything that should be discussed in an exit interview that a person didn't discuss while he was employed." Open communication during your employment could even clean up whatever issues you had with the company and prevented the need for an exit interview at all.

When your career brings you the opportunity to exit on a good note, take it. Honesty — albeit with a positive spin — is always the best policy.

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