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ATTITUDINAL AND STATUS EFFECTS

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Abstract

In order to assess the effects that attitudes toward particular aspects of work life and status (management vs. non-management) might have on the intended willingness to discuss issues during exit interviews, managerial and non-managerial workers were asked to evaluate their attitudes toward particular aspects of work life, as well as their willingness to discuss these issues during an exit interview. Results showed that status alone did not affect willingness to discuss issues, but that attitudes and status had an interactive effect on willingness.

INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon for an employee's resignation to come as a complete surprise to his supervisor. Even though performance appraisals, counseling, and career planning interviews may have been conducted, the supervisor is often unaware that an employee is considering a resignation. Often, this scenario can be traced to a poor organizational structure or the development of communication barriers between a worker and his supervisor.

This study investigated the exit interview as a tool whose purpose is to uncover organizational characteristics that may be contributing to employee turnover. The exit interview is simply a discussion conducted during one of the last working days between a representative of an organization and a person whose employment with that organization has been ended. As a management tool, it has generated both acclaim and criticism. Some maintain that it can play a major role in reducing an organization's voluntary turnover rate, while others contend that few organizations conduct exit interviews because their value is questionable (Garretson, 1982).

BACKGROUND

Exit interviews can be effective in gathering information from employees regarding their impressions and experiences with that organization. Topics covered during exit interviews are varied and may include: the reason for departure, rating of the job, supervision, working conditions, advancement opportunities, training, pay, and things they liked best (and least) about the job. The objectives of the interview may also include obtaining information about the employee's new job and organization as well as promoting good public relations (Lefkowitz and Katz, 1969).

The exit interview should be conducted by someone who is perceived as

neutral, so that the employee can be open and frank with comments. Therefore, a staff person, such as a member of the personnel department, is generally a better choice than a supervisor or line manager. Personnel studies showed that employees are likely to be more open in their comments when speaking on a confidential basis with someone with whom they have had previous contact, such as a member of the personnel staff. Personnel specialists have the added advantage of being able to conduct exit interviews with a number of employees who leave which enables them to detect patterns and identify departmental or organizational trends (Goodale, 1982). Since in most cases exit interviewers are also employment recruiters, they are more skilled in obtaining meaningful information than supervisors or line managers might be (Garretson, 1982; Baron, 1986).

Although there have been repeated criticisms regarding the validity and reliability of exit interviews, most published studies have ignored these criticisms. In the Hinrichs study (1971), three different information sources of reasons for voluntary resignation of professional employees were evaluated: (a) exit interviews conducted by company management, (b) follow-up attitude questionnaires mailed from the company's personnel department, and (c) exit interviews by an outside consultant. Over three successive years, the distribution of reasons for termination derived from the management exit interviews did not correlate significantly with data from the follow-up mail questionnaire. In the Garretson (1982) study of 18 major organizations, three major conclusions emerged. First, for many organizations, the exit interview is a symbolic gesture because no use is made of the information obtained. Second, many organizations are obtaining information on a variety of factors that could be used as a basis for turnover-reduction programs.

Third, little effort is being devoted to quantifying the costs of turnover; therefore, it is impossible at present to determine whether exit interviews are cost-effective.

In an effort to prevent the risk of information falsification, attempts to standardize the method for conducting an exit interview with objective results have been made (Lefkowitz, 1969; Hilb, 1978; Wehrenberg, 1980; Goodale, 1982). Goodale suggested a four-step planning and implementation process which includes a review employment history, a review performance appraisals, a talk with current and past supervisors, and the development of a list of topics (e.g., orientation and training, work itself, supervision, performance appraisal and employee development, company benefits and policies).

Employee Behavior

From the perspective of organizational behavior researchers, any communication, such as those between interviewer and interviewee, is subject to communication distortion. Such distortion on the part of the interviewee, be it conscious or unconscious, is mostly aimed at creating a favorable image for the interviewee (cf. Schlenker, 1980; Thompson, 1960). Thus, falsification of interview or survey data may be used to posture the interviewee's image of himself in the eyes of the company he/she is leaving. Such posturing often results in the employee misleading the company into a favorable image of itself so that the former employee may gain further rewards in the form of positive recommendations or an improved reputation.

Organizational theorists (see Thompson, 1960) have noted that the impression which employees foster at work may be as important as their actual work accomplishments. In order to foster the proper impression, workers may attempt to manipulate the images that co-workers and management have of them;

such attempts to manipulate the impressions others have of oneself is known as impression management or self-presentation (cf. Schlenker, 1980).

Until recently, the study of impression management has been the focus of only social psychologists. However, recent work (e.g. Giacalone, 1985; Klein and Ritti, 1984; Lutz, 1983; and Pfeffer, 1981) have brought the concepts of impression management to the study of organization behavior. Various researchers have focused on diverse aspects of impression management ranging from discussions of general principles (Klein & Ritti, 1984; Pfeffer, 1981) to research on principles of gaining responsibility for positive organizational outcomes (Giacalone, 1985).

The literature on the intentional distortion of information to create a favorable image of oneself has provided evidence that impression management is often used within the employment interview context. In an investigation of self-presentation in interviews, Fletcher and Spencer (1984) found that females were less inclined to self-present in an assertive manner than males, while male interviewers were more likely to foster more restrictive, less relaxed self-presentations than female interviewers. Similarly, Fletcher (1981) reported that females preferred to behave in a less aggressive style of self-presentation during interviews. Von Baeyer, Sherk, and Zanna (1981) found that female applicants tended to present themselves in a stereotypical female manner when they knew a male interviewer held a more traditional perspective on women. In another study of interviewing, Baron (1986), reported that male subjects reacted more strongly against a female applicant who excessively self-presented than did female subjects.

Present Study

Hinrichs (1975) found that several factors probably detract from the

effectiveness of company exit interviews. Mainly, the terminating employee is undoubtedly consciously reluctant to be honest. For example, personnel in management positions don't want to burn bridges behind them. They may want employment references and would prefer not to discuss uncomfortable and critical issues. In desiring to leave their employers with a particular image of them in mind, exiting employees may distort the information that they give to an employer. However, it seems that the degree of distortion that employees would engage in may be dependent primarily on two factors: the departing employee's position (management/non-management) and the departing employee's attitudes toward the particular issue that is discussed.

This study attempted to assess these two factors by focusing on the following research questions:

1. To what extent would the attitude toward job-related issues of voluntary resignation affect intention to discuss an issue?
2. To what extent would managerial and non-managerial subjects intend to express their feelings about the particular issues during the exit interview with a personnel specialist?

Method

Subjects. 99 employees (54 males, 45 females) working in the Rhode Island-Southeastern Massachusetts area were asked to respond to a short questionnaire which was being used for research purposes by a faculty member of a local college. Of these employees, 44 classified themselves as part of management, while 55 reported that they were not part of management.

Procedure. Employees were given a brief questionnaire which informed them that a faculty member of a local business college was doing research on how employees perceived their job. Employees were asked not to put their names anywhere on the questionnaire, and were assured that their information would not be seen by anyone other than the researcher.

The first part of the questionnaire contained the listing of a variety of job-related issues (Table 1) that were compiled from the literature on exit interviewing. These 12 issues represented the most commonly mentioned reasons for an employee voluntarily resigning from a job. The subjects were asked to provide attitudinal ratings of their feelings toward these issues on a scale from 1 (very positive) to 5 (very negative). In the second part of the questionnaire, the subjects were then asked to evaluate the extent to which they would tend to express their feelings on each of these issues on a scale from 1 (would express none of their feelings) to 5 (would express all of their feelings). Finally, subjects were asked to provide some general descriptive information regarding their job (management/non management, tenure on job, etc.)

Results

Categorization. Attitudinal ratings (feelings toward the topic) were subjected to a median split so as to attain high (positive) and low (negative) categories of the attitude toward each of the topics. A list of the interview topics and the respective medians are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Analysis of Variance. Intention ratings (whether employees would discuss their feelings about the topic) were then subjected to a 2 (management/non-management) X 2 (positive/negative attitude from categorization) analysis of variance.

The analyses revealed no main effects for rank, but did reveal a main effect of attitude for feelings on the job itself, immediate supervisor, training, rules, constraints and policies of the company, working conditions, advancement opportunities, and relationships with peers. The analysis also revealed significant interactions for stress, immediate supervisor, upper level management and training. The data for these effects are summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

Insert Tables 3 and 4 About Here

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated and assessed employee behavior intentions during exit interviews. It has shown that while it is possible for organizations to gather information through exit interviews, such interviews may be biased due to both the individual's position and their attitude toward the topic discussed.

Implications for Organizations

The basic finding of this study is that when meeting with the personnel manager, or other personnel specialists for an exit interview at the end of their job tenure, employees may choose not to express their honest appraisal of certain topics. In fact, they can actually convey a distorted view of their

feelings. This likelihood of distortion and self presentation may be particularly acute in the managerial ranks, as compared to non-managerial positions.

This finding presents the organization with a formidable problem. If any number of employees leave an organization as a result of negative attitudes/feelings toward any of these topics, a troubled organization may not be able to get honest feedback from the departees. To compound the problem, it may receive positively biased information on these topics that truly masks the reality of the situation.

A further problem, though not addressed by this study, is the tendency of those conducting the exit interview to interpret things in a positive light. This is especially true if the interviews are not conducted by a neutral person or department. This could help to compound the false impressions received from the exit interviews.

Recommendations

Exit interviews should continue being used since they offer a unique opportunity to solicit information that (if accurate) can be used for constructive improvement. However, a concentrated exit interview strategy must be utilized to maximize the value of the process. We recommend a three pronged proactive-strategy aimed at improving

- 1) the exit interviewer
- 2) the exit interview itself and
- 3) the performance appraisal system

First, the most crucial part of the process is probably the person conducting the exit interview. The selection and training of this person is crucial. Without question they should be someone from a neutral department

(such as personnel) who has training in interviewing. The interviewer must be perceived as a person who is open to suggestions and perceived as trustworthy enough to maintain the confidentiality of sensitive information.

Since self-presentation will be used by the terminating employee, it is important that the interviewer be well versed in impression management techniques. They should be able to recognize the more obvious self-presentation tactics, and be able to probe the interviewee to solicit the real motives behind the termination.

Secondly, the interview itself needs to be planned and researched. Some background research should be done prior to the interview, including a look through the individual's personnel file and a talk with the terminating employee's supervisor. Additionally, using a standard exit interview format will allow for an identification of trends.

The interview itself should be a relaxed, constructive time with no interruptions. In order not to intensify feelings on sensitive subjects, the interviewer must be careful not to take sides. The whole process needs to be one of a positive-forward looking assessment that can benefit both sides. But the interviewer needs to be continually aware that self-presentations and distortions will be used.

Last we believe that most organizations can do a better job of performance appraisal that will allow them to detect problems much earlier than exit interviews. All supervisors must learn to recognize impression management techniques. It is probable that employees always attempt to put their best foot forward, especially during their annual/periodic performance appraisal, MBO meeting, or whatever type of employee evaluation the organization employs (Wood and Mitchell, 1980; Arnold and Feldman, 1981).

Therefore, if supervisors knew how to identify obvious self-presenting during the periodic employee appraisal period they could focus on true feelings and concerns. It is probable that when the distortions are stripped away, the same topics that are sensitive during exit interviews will also be sensitive during other conversations with supervisors. Early, accurate identification of concerns and issues will not only make the exit interview easier, but may prevent the turnover problems which necessitated the interview itself. Again, this should be a proactive rather than a reactive strategy.

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TABLE 1

LIST OF EXIT INTERVIEW TOPICS AND THEIR MEDIAN

1. the job itself (MD = 1)
2. your immediate supervisor (MD = 2)
3. upper level management (MD = 2)
4. the working conditions (MD = 2)
5. the advancement opportunities (MD = 3)
6. the training you received (MD = 2)
7. your pay or general compensation (MD = 2)
8. your job stress (MD = 3)
9. your personal relationship with peers (MD = 1)
10. the rules, constraints and policy of the company (MD = 2)
11. geographic location of the job (MD = 2)
12. performance appraisal or performance appraisal methods (MD = 3)

TABLE 2

MEANS FOR MAIN EFFECT OF FEELINGS TOWARD TOPIC INTERACTION

	Negative Feelings	Positive Feelings	F	P
1.	3.9	4.48	9.93	.01
2.	3.48	4.26	8.45	.01
3.	3.27	3.84	2.75	ns
4.	4.09	4.59	5.40	.02
5.	4.09	4.56	6.06	.02
6.	4.07	4.68	7.18	.01
7.	3.88	4.22	1.00	ns
8.	3.87	4.14	1.14	ns
9.	3.44	3.92	3.75	.05
10.	3.62	4.39	7.98	.01
11.	4.09	4.12	.01	ns
12.	4.45	4.21	.88	ns

TABLE 3

MEANS FOR STATUS X FEELINGS TOWARD TOPIC INTERACTION

	Management/ Positive	Management/ Negative	Non-Management/ Positive	Non-Management Negative	F	P
1.	4.57	3.75	4.41	4.15	3.06	ns
2.	4.56a	3.22b	3.94a,b	3.67b	4.04	.05
3.	4.50a	3.25b	3.11b	3.29b	5.52	.02
4.	4.55	4.00	4.63	4.18	.05	ns
5.	4.50	4.15	4.60	4.05	.27	ns
6.	4.33a,b	4.28a,b	4.85a	3.78b	3.90	.05
7.	4.20	4.07	4.23	3.74	.20	ns
8.	4.58b	3.33a	3.82b	4.21a,b	9.94	.01
9.	4.16	3.55	3.35	3.76	.15	ns
10.	4.40	4.00	4.38	3.38	.91	ns
11.	4.21	4.00	4.04	4.14	.18	ns
12.	4.06	4.57	4.33	4.38	.88	ns