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DISCUSSION WILLINGNESS IN THE EXIT INTERVIEW: A ROLE-PLAY FIELD INVESTIGATION[1]

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to determine the effect of feelings on willingness to discuss issues during exit interviews. Using a role play methodology, subjects were asked to role play either positive or negative feelings toward their personnel manager, and either positive or negative feelings toward their company. They were then asked to role play how willling they would be to discuss particular work-related issues. Results show that while diverging feelings toward the company yield few differences in willingness to discuss issues, differing feelings toward the interviewer yielded greater willingness to discuss issues. Additionally, it was found that on a number of issues, greatest willingness to discuss was evident when there was a positive feeling toward the company and the interviewer.

The exit interview is a discussion conducted between a representative of an organization and an employee whose employment with that organization has terminated. As an information gathering tool, it has found both advocates and detractors, with some who insist that it can play a major role in reducing voluntary turnover, and others who argue that its value, for a variety of reasons, is questionable (Garretson & Teel,1982).

Exit interviews have been used in gathering information from employees regarding on their overall impressions and experiences with the organization and their particular job, their reason for departure, as well as their reaction to supervision, working conditions, advancement opportunities, training, and pay. The interview may also include questions about the employee's new job and organization (see Lefkowitz and Katz, 1969). Finally, exit interviews are seen by some as an organization's attempt at promoting good public relations with an individual who is no longer a part of the organization.

Repeated criticisms regarding the validity and reliability of exit interviews can be found in the exit interview research, with most focusing on the problem of distorted responses by interviewees. Hinrichs (1971) found that the distribution of reasons for termination derived from the management exit interviews did not correlate significantly with data from a follow-up mail questionnaire. Jablonski (1975) cited defensiveness and distrust as major problems in the exit interview process. Zarandona & Camuso (1985) have offered numerous reasons why the exit interview data may be distorted, including the lack of incentive to be honest and fear of retribution. As a result of these problems, personnel experts have offered a variety of suggestions for improving the effectiveness of exit interviews (see Zarandona & Camuso, 1985).

Employee Behavior

From the perspective of researchers on exit interviewing, there are various reasons why the process of exit interviewing is subject to communication distortion. A primary reason for this may be fear of hurting fellow employees (As You Were Saying, 1966), oneself (in the eyes of a new employer)(Zarandona & Camuso, 1985), or of general retribution (Jablonski, 1975). Additionally, the departing employee may have no incentive to be honest or may wish to leave on good terms (Zarandona & Camuso, 1985), may feel uncomfortable with the truth (As You Were Saying, 1966), may see the truth as being too personal (Drost, O'Brien, & Marsh, 1987), or may believe that supervisors do not care (Jablonski, 1975). Much of the falsification, therefore, may be simply to posture the interviewee or fellow workers most favorably in the eyes of the company. 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. In an effort to prevent the risk of information falsification, attempts to standardize the method for conducting an exit interview with objective results have also been made (see Lefkowitz & Katz, 1969; Hilb, 1978; Wehrenberg, 1980; Goodale, 1982).

One interpretation of this distortion is explained by impression management theory (see Schlenker, 1980; Giacalone, 1985). From this perspective, departing employees may attempt to manipulate the images that management has of them so as to maintain a positive self-image, or to reap organizational rewards. This perspective has been applied to explain behavior in interviews (see Fletcher, 1981; Von Baeyer, Sherk, & Zanna, 1981; Fletcher & Spencer, 1984; Baron, 1986), although its existence in exit interviews has never been examined.

It is, however, possible that distortion in exit interviews is not a

result of impression management but a result of feelings toward the company and the person who is doing the interview. As such, it is feasible that individuals who have particular feelings (negative or positive) are more or less likely to provide information. Essentially, individuals may choose to provide information because they _like_ the company or the person doing the interview, but may feel that those who are not liked are not deserving of the information. The effect of feelings on organizational behavior, while beyond the scope of this paper, has been used in a variety of areas within the organizational literature (e.g. Scarpello & Vandenberg, 1987).

The present study investigated how particular feelings toward the individual doing the interview, as well as feelings toward the company would affect an individual's willingness to discuss issues related to their decision to separate from the company.

METHOD

Subjects. Ninety-nine workers (47 males and 52 females) currently employed by a wide variety of businesses volunteered their participation in the study. The workers had been employed an average 6.1 years with their present company (Range = 34 years); seventy-five percent of the sample were full time employees.

Procedure. Subjects at a variety of companies were told that a member of the business faculty at a local college was doing research on employees separating from their companies, and were asked to participate in the study. All agreed to participate. Subjects were asked not to identify themselves so as to report their information most correctly.

Subjects were randomly given one of four questionnaires whose cover sheet stated that "Today, we would like you to fill out this questionnaire, not as yourself, but as you think that a person with the feelings described

below would answer the questionnaire"

Following these instructions, all subjects were asked to assume that they had resigned the position at their company where they currently worked. Subjects were then given one of four descriptions of themselves: 1) they had very positive feelings toward the company and trusted/liked their personnel manager, 2) they had very positive feelings toward the company and did not trust/disliked their personnel manager, 3) they had very negative feelings toward the company and trusted/liked their personnel manager, or 4) they had very negative feelings toward the company and did not trust/disliked their personnel manager. The design, therefore, was a 2 (positive/negative feelings toward company) x 2 (positive/negative feelings toward the personnel manager).

Finally, all subjects were told that their personnel manager had asked them to address their honest sentiments about various topics regarding their job and how it affected their choice to leave.

Subjects were asked to rate their willingness to express their dispositions regarding each of the topics on a 1 ("I would express none of my feelings on the topic") to 5 ("I would express all of my feelings on the topic"), with a rating of 3 acting as the neutral midpoint. The topics to be evaluated are listed in Table 1.

RESULTS

A 2 (feelings toward company) x 2 (feelings toward personnel manager) ANOVA revealed a variety of main effects and interactions. These results are summarized in Tables 2-4.

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Insert Tables 2-4 About Here

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As the tables show, there seems to be little independent effects due to

the role-played feelings toward the company, although role-played feelings toward the personnel manager resulted in a greater willingness to discuss a variety of topics. Even in these cases where significant differences wre not attained, means were consistently in the direction of greater willingness to discuss topics when there were more positive feelings toward the personnel manager.

Interaction effects, however, were more difficult to interpret. It seems that willingness to discuss the job and the training received was greatest when the subject role-played positive feelings toward the Company and personnel manager. However, regarding the rules, constraints, and policy of the company or performance appraised, it seems that negative feelings toward the personnel manager, despite positive feelings toward the company, resulted in a lesser willingness to discuss these topics. When other topics were to be raised, it seems that feelings toward the personnel manager and company had no interactive effects.

Discussion

The results show that, in fact, that when workers are asked to role play particular feelings toward an interviewer or the company, these feelings will affect their willingness to discuss information regarding their attitude toward the company.

The data reveal, as predictions suggested, that where differences due to feelings were attained, the direction was generally in the area of greater willingness to discuss issues when a positive feeling was had toward both the personnel manager and the company. It seems, too, that greater willingness to discuss issues appears to follow positive feelings role played toward the interviewer (in this case, the personnel manager), than in those cases where positive feelings are role-played toward the company. This may be an indication

that individuals in these instances see themselves as conveying information to other individuals, rather than to an impersonal company.

Thus, the data would dictate that companies using exit interviews pay special care to the relationship between the interviewer and the exiting individual. Contrary to what impression management theorists might suggest, the use of anonymity via the choice of an unknown person would seem to appear to be of little help, as would the choice of an individual who is not liked by the exiting employee. Perhaps giving the individual a <u>choice</u> of who to report the information to may help in this regard.

Some caution of these results, however, is warranted. First, given some of the criticism of role play methodology, future research will be needed in order to discern the extent to which these results will be replicated in field studies. Second, this study does not take into account the particular attitudes the subject may have toward each of the <u>topics</u> discussed. Previous research (Giacalone, DiBattista, & Duhon, 1988) using workers has shown that such feelings may affect willingness to discusss a topic. Thus, because attitudes toward a topic may augment an individual's desire to discuss a topic, the individual or cumulative effect of feeling toward the company and interviewer on willingness to discuss a topic may be considerably altered. Relatedly, future research will need to consider the confounding which results when interviewees simultaneously must consider their feelings about a topic along with feelings toward the company or interviewer, and provide an interviewer with critical responses.

Future research will also need to consider the effects that individual differences may have on distortions in the exit interview process. Most importantly, researchers will need to determine whether the salient effect of feelings is moderated by an individual's fear of negative evaluation (Watson

& Friend, 1969), self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) or concerns for social
desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). Inasmuch as these three individual
difference factors are likely candidates to affect the expression of feelings,
their investigation could shed some much needed light into distortions in
this research arena.

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TABLE 1
TOPICS WHICH SUBJECTS ADDRESSED

1. The job itself
2. Your immediate supervisor
3. Upper level management
4. The working conditions
5. The advancement opportunities
6. The training you received
7. Your pay or general compensation
8. Your job stress
9. Your personnel relationship with peers
10. The rules, constraints, and policy of the company
11. Geographic location of the job
12. Performance appraisal or performance appraisal methods

TABLE 2
MAIN EFFECT OF FEELINGS TOWARD COMPANY

	Positive Feelings Toward Company	Negative Feelings Toward Company	F	p
1	4.39	3.72	8.88	.004
2	3.47	3.26	.75	ns
3	3.41	3.38	.01	ns
4	4.12	4.12	.00	ns
5	4.12	3.80	1.67	ns
6	4.06	3.74	2.00	ns
7	3.71	3.40	1.62	ns
8	3.24	3.56	1.71	ns
9	2.88	2.76	.20	ns
10	3.55	3.82	1.33	ns
11	3.94	3.68	.90	ns
12	3.82	3.76	.06	ns

TABLE 3
MAIN EFFECT OF FEELINGS TOWARD PERSONNEL MANAGER

	Positive Feelings Toward Personnel Manager	Negative Feelings Toward Personnel Manager	F	p
1	4.24	3.89		
			2.40	ns
2	3.65	3.11		
			5.18	.025
3	3.74	3.09		
			6.27	.014
4	4.50	3.79		
			10.47	.002
5	4.30	3.66		
			6.80	.011
6	4.26	3.58		
			9.09	.003
7	3.65	3.47		
			.52	ns
8	3.93	2.94		
			15.98	.001
9	3.22	2.47		
			8.87	.004
10	3.96	3.45		
			4.51	.036
11	3.83	3.79		
			.01	ns
12	4.00	3.60		
			3.52	ns

TABLE 4

INTERACTION EFFECTS

	Positive Feelings Toward Personnel Manager/Positive Feelings Toward Company	Negative Feelings Toward Personnel Manager/Positive Feelings Toward Company	Positive Feelings Toward Personnel Manager/Negative Feelings Toward Company	Negative Feelings Toward Personnel Manager/Negative Feelings Toward Company	F	p
1	4.78a	4.04b	3.70b	3.74b	3.12	.004
2	3.83	3.15	3.48	3.07	.32	ns
3	3.91	2.96	3.57	3.22	1.40	ns
4	4.57	3.73	4.43	3.85	.33	ns
5	4.61	3.69	4.00	3.63	1.23	ns
6	4.65	3.54b	3.87b	3.63b	3.83	.053
7	3.91	3.54	3.39	.41	.63	ns
8	3.83	2.73	4.04	3.15	.16	ns
9	3.35	2.46	3.09	.48	.32	ns
10	4.13b	3.04a	3.78b	3.85b	5.93	.017
11	4.22	3.69	3.43	3.89	3.23	ns
12	4.30a	3.38b	3.70a,b	3.81a,b	6.07	.016

NOTE: Different subscripts indicate significantly different means,   Duncan's $p < .05$