



Exit Interviews: Staged Right

How to bow out of a job with dignity and grace.

Bravo! You're moving on, perhaps to a new job, and have put in your notice. However, as you wrap things up, you get word from Human Resources (HR) requesting an exit interview before you leave. An interview? Now? And, if so, do you need to prepare? In short, yes, yes, and yes.

An exit interview is a final, formal meeting that's often conducted at the end of your employment by HR, your manager, or both. It's an opportunity for the company to learn why you may be leaving, where you're going, and if you have any feedback you'd like to share. So, how much or how little, do you really want to say? After all, this is also *your* chance to put in a final word.

Should you be a critic?

If you are leaving your role because of a negative experience, don't let hard feelings transfer over to the exit interview, no matter how bad the job was or how bitter you may feel. The meeting may just be a formality, and the interviewer is not looking for you to dish on your former colleagues, rant about how you felt overworked, or grouse about soggy fries in the cafeteria. As with all career-related situations, be professional and choose your words wisely. Avoid emotional responses like "I hated how so-and-so did such-and-such!" And using negative superlatives is rarely constructive in a professional environment. Besides, a spite-filled soliloquy won't do much good since you're no longer considered part of the company. Any concerns you had should have been voiced while you were still an employee. Instead, vent ahead of time to your roommate, your therapist, or a friend to get it out of your system. Otherwise, you risk leaving a bad impression, losing a reference, even jeopardizing your reputation. The networking world can be surprisingly small, and people talk. And, unlike a new job interview, exit interviews offer no further opportunities for you to repair missteps. So, any last impression you leave may well be lasting—as in *forever*.

Spotlight the positive.

When answering questions in an exit interview, highlight what you liked about the job. It's much

more effective than mentioning only what you didn't like. Plus, your positive comments can go a long way to improving workplace culture. If you *do* feel strongly about something and want to help effect a change, present useful data points in a manner that's professional and constructive for future policies or practices. Frame your comments in a positive, forward-thinking manner. For example, say "I believe it's best for the company to have more oversight for their interns" versus "I really didn't like how my fellow interns didn't do their fair share of work." Be polite and brief. Leave a good last impression in case your paths cross again.

Don't ad lib.

Plan and prepare for an exit interview as you would any other formal meeting. You'll be less likely to panic or blurt out something you may regret. Your responses should be well thought out and as carefully worded as those that first got you the job. Also, have notes and questions ready. For example, you may need to ask about extending your benefit coverage (COBRA). And you may be asked to complete paperwork related to your benefits or retirement plan. In the case of an internship, you may be requested to complete a final evaluation.

Finally, end your interview with a "Thank you" and kind words. Express gratitude for the opportunity to gain experience and expand your skills. You never know what the future may hold, so keep your options open in case you get a callback someday; a slammed door is a closed door—and lost opportunities.

A professional and positive attitude can go a long way to carrying you from this job to the next. Leave on a high note and you can applaud yourself for a successful closing act.



i n a nutshell:

Take your cue:

- **Prepare as conscientiously for your exit interview as you did for your first**
- **Leave out the drama and personal attacks; any emotional monologue of grievances belongs offstage**
- **Keep the dialogue polite, positive, and professional**
- **Be poised and choose your words carefully; don't say or do anything you may regret**
- **If you must, offer honest, constructive, but tactful feedback**
- **Don't burn bridges; close with appreciation and a kind word**

Whether or not you enjoyed your role, be a professional and make your exit interview a command performance. Now, go break a leg!