

Why are you leaving? The question can elicit some surprising answers

There's good information to be had from a staffer who's leaving.

People who have resigned "don't have a hidden agenda." They tend to be candid and forthcoming, and the firm can get valuable feedback from them, says **MARCIA W. WASSERMAN** of Comprehensive Management Solutions Inc. in Northridge, CA. The company provides practice management consulting to small and mid-sized law firms.

Here are a few rules to follow and a few questions to ask.

TWO MINUTES BEFORE EXIT

Do the interviewing just as the staffer is ready to walk out the door. That means late afternoon of the last day.

The last-minute timing ensures that whatever negative remarks the staffer makes won't carry repercussion. By contrast, if the interview is held the day Staffer A gives two weeks' notice, and if Staffer A says something unfavorable about Partner B, word could get out and Partner B could make the staffer's life difficult for the next two weeks.

And beyond the unpleasantness of it, there's potential for the situation to lead to a claim of retaliation.

SOMEBODY WITH NO BIAS

Just one interviewer is enough. Having somebody else in the room can be intimidating.

The interviewer needs to be somebody other than the immediate supervisor, the best choice, of course, being the human resources director.

If there isn't a neutral person, use a written questionnaire.

The obvious drawback is that there's no opportunity for follow-up questions on any particular point, she says. But the interview has to be as impersonal as possible, or the answers won't be candid.

GETTING THE GOODS

Open the interview by telling the staffer that participation is voluntary, but that the firm values what people say – good and bad – because the information identifies things that need improvement or change.

As to what to ask, Wasserman sets out these questions:

- *Why are you leaving?* The answer may be straight-forward and truthful. But most employees hold back here, she says, so the next questions elicit more specific information.

- *What did you enjoy most about working here?* Saying something positive about the firm makes it easier to move to discussing the bad points.

- *What did you like least about working here?* Many people leave their jobs because of a life change such as the birth of a child. But when somebody is leaving because of discontent, the firm needs to know about it. And the answer to this question is usually the exact thing that has led to the departure.

Wasserman adds that somebody who cites pay as the issue and is going down the block for \$200 a month more is quite likely hoping the firm will counter that offer. Her response is don't take the bait. That person isn't committed to staying. And using that as leverage "doesn't show loyalty to the firm."

What's more, she says, when people make up their minds to leave "98% of the time, they're going to leave."

- *How was your relationship with your supervisor?* People often leave because they don't like the supervisor. Look into whatever problem the staffer mentions, because it could be an issue for the other staff as well.

It could be something as fixable as the fact that Attorney A gives poor directions. More serious, however, is a report of harassment or retaliation that calls for investigation and legal advice.

- *Do you think the technology here supports the firm's needs?* People leave over technology. Sometimes they leave out of frustration, but other times they leave out of concern that not keeping up with new technology will affect their careers.

- *What can we do to get our staff to be more productive?* Good suggestions often appear. The staffer may have an innovative way to share the work or to change the work flow or to improve the job descriptions.

- *Is the pay competitive? the benefits?* People may dance around personal problems, but they are "very forthcoming" about whether pay and benefits are up to par, Wasserman says. The firm could be paying too little to attract good staff. It could also be paying more than the market requires.

- *How was the orientation?* People leave when they don't feel part of the team, and the team building is greatly dependent on the orientation. If the staffer says "I never felt I fit in here," start evaluating the orientation procedure.

- *Does your job description accurately describe what you do?* The staffer may have been doing "a whole lot more work than anybody realizes," and some of it may be unnecessary or even inappropriate. The answer might be, for example, that a secretary has been spending a good part of the day running personal errands for a partner even though firm policy doesn't allow it.

- *Is there anything we should know about that we haven't covered here?* Be prepared for hidden bombs, she says, because at this point of the interview, "people feel safe." They don't mind mentioning what's going on.

The staffer might say, for example, that another employee is being harassed but doesn't want to report it for fear of losing the job.

KEEP IT AT NEED-TO-KNOW

Who gets to see the results?

Share them with the management, but only on a need-to-know basis. Report only what's alarming or great or that requires investigation.

Don't publish the results and don't share them with all the partners. There's no need to embarrass Partner B by telling everybody about Staffer A's criticism of B's work habits.