

# Motivation for and Prevention of Honest Responding in Exit Interviews and Surveys

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**ABSTRACT.** Exit interviews and surveys (EIS) provide unique opportunities for organizations to collect diagnostic information. Although the EIS process may be open to unethical response distortion by exiting employees, there have been few scientific inquiries into the reasons for such distortion. The present study was an attempt to identify these reasons. The results indicate three factors that can motivate honest responding (positive equity, capricious reasons, and negative equity) and three factors that can prevent honest responding (negative consequences, personal and situational reasons, and objectivity).

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**ORGANIZATIONS USE EXIT INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS (EIS)** to elicit information from employees who are involuntarily or voluntarily leaving the company. Typically, this information encompasses the overall impressions and experiences of the exiting employee during his or her time with the organization. Companies then use these responses to evaluate many aspects of the organization.

Exit interviews are often extremely time-consuming. Therefore, some organizations (e.g., the U.S. Navy and Army) have designed exit questionnaires or surveys. These surveys consist of simple questions that can be coded or scanned quickly. Because these surveys increase efficiency, they are most often used in organizations that are trying to get objective information only (i.e., numerical responses) or perhaps to speed up the exit process.

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Unfortunately, the research literature is not clear about what data should be gathered during EIS; rather, companies have developed their own instruments. The formats of exit surveys are therefore quite varied, covering issues such as reasons for leaving; ratings of the job, the quality of supervision, and working conditions; opportunities for advancement; and the adequacy of training, pay, and performance appraisals (Drost, O'Brien, & Marsh, 1987; Giacalone & Knouse, 1989).

### *Purposes of EIS*

The basic purpose for collecting the data is to assist management in detecting employee problems or organizational events that may either foster or reduce employee turnover. An inherent assumption on the part of the organization is that the exit survey can discover what causes employee dissatisfaction, so changes can be made and costs (e.g., unwanted turnover) can be reduced.

Reducing turnover is not the only advantage of exit surveys. Information gathered from the surveys can be compiled into a database for diagnosing organizational problems. For example, survey information can be used to detect unfair business practices (i.e., sexual harassment and discrimination), to uncover competitive compensation issues, to locate faulty supervision procedures, to understand ineffective training practices, to identify inconsistencies in appraisal systems, and to discover problems in general working conditions (Bruce, 1988; Drost et al., 1987). In short, exit surveys have the potential to improve the overall quality of the workplace by providing information that can be translated for human resource development (Ulschak, 1983).

### *Problems With EIS*

Despite the potential advantages, there can be problems with the survey data. The validity and reliability of the process have been questioned because of the biased responses that may occur. Giacalone (1993; Giacalone, Elig, Ginexi, & Bright, 1995) noted that although many organizations use exit interviews and surveys, the process and the data gathered have been criticized, from administrative and methodological standpoints, by both researchers and practitioners.

The administrative criticism of EIS has generally emphasized that the data are seldom used (see Garretson & Teel, 1982), the process is poorly administered (see Woods & Macaulay, 1987), and often the feedback to management is erroneous (Hinrichs, 1975). One might conclude that many organizations do not use EIS effectively.

Conversely, the methodological criticism of EIS is that the underlying techniques used in many interview and survey processes are fundamentally flawed, leading to low reliability and validity. These methodological deficiencies include poor conceptualization, testing, and implementation (see, for example, Drost et al.,

1987; Garretson & Teel, 1982; Garrison & Ferguson, 1977; Giacalone, 1989; Giacalone & Duhon, 1991; Giacalone & Knouse, 1989; Hinrichs, 1975; Lefkowitz & Katz, 1969; Woods & Macaulay, 1987; Zarandona & Camuso, 1985).

At the heart of the methodological criticisms is a basic concern that exiting personnel may not be motivated to provide the organization with appropriate and accurate feedback, either because the interviewer's attitudinal approach is not always completely objective (Hinrichs, 1971) or because responses of exiting personnel may be driven by personal or professional concerns that may make their responses defensive (see Giacalone, Knouse, & Ashworth, 1991). Studies by Hinrichs (1971) and Zarandona and Camuso (1985) have shown that former employees' explanations for leaving may be inconsistent with what they reported in the EIS when they were exiting. For example, Lefkowitz and Katz (1969) compared exit interview results with follow-up questionnaire results and found no significant correlations between the reasons given for leaving. They concluded that the reliability of the interview information was low. Hinrichs (1971) found that the reasons for termination or resignation given during exit interviews did not correlate significantly with data gathered from follow-up questionnaires. He found, for example, that conflict with management was not mentioned in exit interviews, but on 14% of the follow-up questionnaires, individuals cited conflict with management as an important factor. Dissatisfaction with advancement was also mentioned in the follow-up questionnaire, but not in the original exit interview.

### *Reasons for Biased EIS Responses*

An exiting employee may offer biased responses for several reasons. First, because the employee is leaving the company, he or she may believe that a recitation of actual problems within the organization may have no direct, personal relevance—there will be no personal benefit from changes resulting from honest responses. In short, he or she may not be motivated to discuss uncomfortable material (Zarandona & Camuso, 1985). Second, an employee may fear repercussions, either for him- or herself (e.g., negative recommendations to prospective employers) or for co-workers (e.g., changes in work conditions; Giacalone, 1989; Giacalone & Knouse, 1989; Hinrichs, 1975; Zarandona & Camuso, 1985). Third, the employee might not give accurate information because of the fear that such responses could ultimately affect co-workers' job security (Giacalone & Knouse, 1989). Last, a parting employee may believe that the information he or she provides will never be used by the company to implement changes in policy or to create a more efficient workplace. Therefore, giving honest answers may seem to be a waste of effort and time (Zarandona & Camuso, 1985).

Such potentially distorted responses have led researchers to suggest ways of reducing or preventing these biases. For example, Giacalone (1989) suggested that the interviewer should avoid topics in which distorted information

is likely to occur, and others have suggested that companies should standardize the formats of exit surveys (Bruce, 1988; Hilb, 1978; Zarandona & Camuso, 1985) or use a member of the personnel department or an outside consultant to conduct the interview (Hinrichs, 1971, 1975; Sherwood, 1983; Zarandona & Camuso, 1985).

Giacalone and his associates (Giacalone & Duhon, 1991; Giacalone, Knouse, & Ashworth, 1991; Knouse & Giacalone, 1992) have taken an impression-management approach to EIS, believing that employees distort information during the EIS process because the process is unintentionally designed to motivate separating employees to create a certain image of themselves in the eyes of the organization (Giacalone & Duhon, 1991). The choice not to disclose information or to mitigate negative feelings may be caused by the company's request for controversial, personal, or inside information that could endanger future choices for the separating employee or for those colleagues still in the organization. Employees may not wish to withhold or distort information, but the EIS process, because of its flawed application, leaves them no rational choice. This point of view was supported by data that showed that separating personnel are more likely to distort information about issues that can get them into trouble (e.g., leadership) than they are about relatively innocuous issues (e.g., quality of medical benefits; see Giacalone et al., 1995).

Consistent with this impression-management view is the concern with the data collected from employees who separate involuntarily. Unlike the voluntarily separating employee, the involuntarily separating employee may respond to the EIS process by couching his or her experiences in a more negative context. Thus, this employee may try to create particular impressions as a form of retaliation (e.g., get management angry or create an atmosphere of distrust) or to mitigate the appearance that he or she is responsible for the involuntary separation. Data from a military sample (Giacalone et al., 1995) have indicated that voluntary and involuntary groups do, in fact, respond differently.

### *The Present Study*

The conditions individuals take into account when deciding whether to tell the truth in the EIS process have never been systematically explored. In the present study, we examined people's reasons for distorting information in the EIS process from an a priori rather than a post hoc approach; that is, we sought to identify and determine the initial factors that may motivate or prevent honest responding.

In the first phase of the study, we developed a list of issues that might either motivate or prevent honest responding during the EIS process, so we could create an instrument to use to ascertain groupings of those issues. In the second phase of the study, we attempted to assess the extent to which the individuals felt that particular conditions that were identified in Phase 1 would affect their responses in an EIS process.

## Method

### *Phase 1*

*Participants and procedure.* Sixty-three graduate students (47 men, 16 women) seeking an MBA at the University of Richmond were asked to respond to a brief questionnaire as part of a course requirement. They were informed that a student of the college was doing research on how employees might react to exit questionnaires. Thirty-nine of the participants classified themselves as part of management, and 23 had participated in an EIS process at some time prior to this study.

The participants were advised not to put their names anywhere on the questionnaire and were requested to be as honest as possible. The instructions were as follows: "Suppose that you had resigned your position at work in order to take a position with another company. As part of your last meeting with the personnel manager, you were given an exit questionnaire to fill out." A sample copy of a prototype exit questionnaire was provided; participants were asked not to fill out the sample. The participants were then asked to provide answers to two questions: (1) "List what specific fear, concerns or other factors would prevent you from telling how you felt regarding each of the topics in an exit questionnaire." (2) "Specifically, list what factors, if any, might motivate you to tell the absolute truth about how you felt regarding each of the exit questionnaire topics." Finally, the participants were asked to provide some general personal information (e.g., gender, management or nonmanagement position, years worked, previous participation in exit interviews).

The individual responses to each of the questions were then compiled into separate master lists of categories generated by the participants. Two independent evaluators individually read through the master lists for each question and identified and deleted items that were redundant. The evaluators then met to compare their two lists. Approximately 80% of the deletions on the list were exact matches. For those categories where there was disagreement, the evaluators discussed their interpretations of each item and reconciled the underlying meaning of the items. Once the underlying meaning of the item was agreed upon, the evaluators proceeded to include or discard items. When this iteration was concluded, the evaluators had agreed on all items that should be either discarded or incorporated into the final list. The final list of categories, consisting of 21 items for the first question (prevent discussion) and 17 items for the second question (motivate discussion), was then edited for grammar, consistency, and style.

### *Phase 2*

*Participants and procedure.* The 21 items from the responses to the first question in Phase 1 were developed into a survey instrument (Prevention Survey) with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *would definitely not prevent me* (1) to *would*

*definitely prevent me* (5). The participants were asked, "To what extent would each of the following prevent you from telling an exit interviewer how you felt regarding a topic?"

Similarly, the 17 items from the responses to the second question in Phase I were developed into a survey instrument (Motivation Survey) with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *would definitely not motivate me* (1) to *would definitely motivate me* (5). The participants were asked, "To what extent would each of the following motivate you to tell an exit interviewer the truth about a topic?"

MBA students at the University of Richmond and the University of Southwestern Louisiana were asked to distribute the questionnaire to co-workers at their current workplace. A total of 125 full-time employees (81 men, 44 women) responded to this brief questionnaire. Of these individuals, 77 classified themselves as part of management (64 men, 13 women). The instructions informed the employees that they were going to be asked a series of questions relating to how they might react to an EIS process. A series of additional questions typical of the EIS process (i.e., real questions from actual EIS process procedures, but not directly relevant to the study currently under discussion) regarding attitudes that might indirectly relate to the EIS process were added to complete the survey. To acquire honest responses, we instructed the employees to not put their names on the form and to be as honest as possible. Finally, the employees were asked to put the completed questionnaire in a sealed envelope and return it to the person who gave it to them.

## Results

### *Prevention Survey*

Because there was a large number of categories, the ratings were subjected to a factor analysis with a varimax rotation. With the loading of .45 as a criterion value for inclusion in the interpretation of the factor, the analysis revealed three distinct factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, accounting for 49% of the variance; a Bartlett test of sphericity was significant (984.0,  $p < .001$ ).

Factor 1 was identified as potential negative consequences in the future, characterized by the potential repercussions of clearing payroll and severance packages. Factor 2 was identified as situational, emotional, and personal ramifications, characterized by concern about being blamed for the problems and concern that responses might be misinterpreted. Factor 3 was identified as focusing on objectiveness or accuracy of information, and it was characterized by considerations regarding when the judgment was being made and whether personality conflicts were preventing objectivity. The factor loadings are summarized in Table 1.

### *Motivation Survey*

Because there was a large number of categories, the ratings were subjected to a factor analysis with a varimax rotation. With the loading of .45 as a criterion value

**TABLE 1**  
**Factor Loadings: Considerations That Would Prevent Discussion**

Item	Factor 1: Negative Consequences	Factor 2: Personal and Situational Reasons	Factor 3: Objectivity
Your opinions may be used to help company		.49	
Your opinions may be used to help old company compete against new company	.45		.57
Confidentiality	.45		
Trust of people who will process the information			
Required to document or support your opinions	.64		
Company will not use information effectively			
Your judgments are based on last few days, not entire career		.76	
Possibility of repercussions	.72	.45	
Further questions in response to negative feedback		.67	
You would be labeled a complainer			
You would be blamed for problems which were not under your control		.63	
Personality conflict which would prevent you from being objective			.80
Negative feelings concerning management		.68	
New employees would view your honesty as negative		.49	
Your response may not assess supervisor's overall performance			.54
Potential repercussions in clearing the payroll	.69		
Your responses might be misinterpreted or misapplied			
Company did not have a policy of giving limited information (salary, dates of employment) to future employers	.71		
checking references			
Relationship with interviewer	.50		
You received a severance package	.64		
Disenchantment with the organization		.67	

for inclusion in the interpretation of the factor, the factor analysis revealed three distinct factors with eigenvalues of greater than 1.0, accounting for 54% of the variance, and a Bartlett test of sphericity was significant (862.2,  $p < .001$ ).

Factor 1 was identified as Positive Equity, which reflected a concern for bringing about good for the company or employees, either as good in itself or in response to an equitable environment. This factor was characterized by considerations of others' welfare and previous good treatment by the company. Factor 2 was identified as Capricious and Self-Oriented Reasons, characterized by considerations of money or how one felt that day. Factor 3 was identified as Negative Equity, which reflected a desire to restore a sense of fair play. This factor was characterized by considerations that the company was not fair and that there was a wish to take a parting shot at the company. The loadings for these factors are summarized in Table 2.

### Discussion

This study identified three factors that motivate honest responding in EIS: Positive Equity, Capricious and Self-Oriented Reasons, and Negative Equity. On the positive side, it appears that departing employees will be honest if they have been treated honestly in terms of a history of perceived good treatment by the company and a perception that the good of the company and the good of the individual are intertwined. On the negative side, departing employees may be also be just as candid if they believe that the company was so unfair that any potentially negative consequences are worth the disclosure of this information. Moreover, an employee may not be honest if he or she believes that severe repercussions may follow, that he or she will be personally identified with complaints, and that there could be problems with objectivity.

#### *Implications for EIS Administration*

These results suggest that different types of EIS may be appropriate for different types of organizational environments. For a company with a strong, positive work climate (that has, for example, trust, honesty, and good interpersonal relations), a direct interview at the time of separation may deliver honest responses. For a company with a negative climate, however, an interview given by a neutral third party may be more effective. The company might consider hiring a consultant to give the interview or survey in his or her office (Hinrichs, 1975).

Another suggestion to avoid these types of problems is to conduct exit surveys after the individual has been away from the organization for a considerable amount of time (Giacalone & Knouse, 1989). This process may not be practical, however, because tracking down employees who previously worked for an organization can require substantial amounts of resources and time.



**TABLE 2**  
**Factor Loadings: Considerations That Would Motivate Discussion**

Item	Factor 1: Positive Equity	Factor 2: Capricious and Self-Oriented Reasons	Factor 3: Negative Equity
Injustices of the company outweigh any potential harm			.72
You felt the company was not fair			.70
You felt you would excel in new company		.64	
The good of the organization	.58		
An open discussion prompted by the interviewer	.66		
Received good treatment by the organization	.77		
during the time of the employment	.74		
Pleasant atmosphere of the workplace	.63		
Your job stress			
Company was interested in your job satisfaction	.80		
and career development			
Desire to take a parting shot		.51	.56
You were planning to retire	.58	.46	
Safety was an issue	.54		
The welfare of co-workers was at stake	.64		
Left company on friendly terms		.65	
How you felt when you woke up			
Ethics	.66		
Money		.69	

A third suggestion is to implement a long-term project, wherein the company conducts random follow-up interviews with employees who have left the organization. Comparing responses given at exit time with those given at a later date and calculating the degree to which they differ would allow companies to quantify the degree of bias.

### *Further Research*

Examining the various reasons identified in both motivating and preventing honest responses reveals a strong influence of organizational culture (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Further research should explore the various aspects of organizational culture that affect exiting employees' perceptions of fairness and equity. For example, how does the reward structure, leadership style, and organizational ideology affect the perceptions of former employees (both at exit time and later)? Specifically, how does the reward structure affect perceptions of equitable reward distribution? How does leadership style affect feelings of fair treatment? How does organizational ideology affect the perception that the good of the employee and the good of the company are intertwined?

A second strong influence appears to be interpersonal relations. Employees seem to think in terms of their relationships with supervisors and co-workers when they evaluate the effectiveness of the organization and its practices. Future research should examine how the strength of this relationship affects perceptions of organizational variables. For example, longer term relationships and smaller, more intimate (i.e., cohesive) work groups may lead to a greater distortion of information as departing employees try to protect their close colleagues. On the other hand, individuals who do not develop close ties to co-workers or supervisors, or individuals who work largely independently of others (e.g., outside sales representatives) may be more candid in their responses.

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