

EDITOR'S NOTE

Hey boss, do something about it!

How do you tell if a spouse is cheating on you? You look for signs such as secretive telephone calls, a deviation from his or her "normal" behaviour and the constant look of distraction on a person's face.

But while these are the common signs of a philandering partner, HR practitioners interviewed in this month's Hot topic column say that they are also the signs an employee displays when he or she is thinking about leaving the company. (For more details, see page 6).

The reasons behind an employee's decision to pack his or her cubicle belongings to seek greener pastures isn't new or mysterious to smart HR practitioners. One of the reasons commonly cited by departing employees is a need to get away from a bad boss or supervisor. Other common reasons include a toxic work environment, the lack of career opportunities or learning and development opportunities and the lack of a work-life balance.

What about compensation, you ask? Yes, money does play a factor into a person's decision, but recent surveys indicate that employees (especially the younger generation) understand a paycheck isn't everything in a job and factors such as job satisfaction, career trajectory and a good working environment are equally important.

In our magazine and online newsletters, we often write about the role of people-orientated line managers. That's because with the large amount of responsibilities HR has, it can only do so much in retaining employees. Instead, the supervisors and line managers an employee works with for the most part of the day determines how the employee views and feels about the company.

One common way companies try to understand why employees are leaving is through exit interviews or exit surveys. Exit interviews, which are generally seen as a good employment practice, help HR practitioners understand how they can make the organisation better for remaining employees, and may provide a sense of closure for the departing staff.

However, in a story we wrote for the online newsletter recently, Lynne Ng, regional director of Adecco Southeast Asia, told us that from her

experience, she estimates only 30% of Singapore companies actually conduct exit interviews. If the low numbers aren't worrying enough, there is also the issue of employees giving "politically correct" reasons for their resignation, whether it is for "better opportunities", "more money" or to "pursue their calling".

If employees are leaving due to a fractured relationship with their bosses, the lack of honesty in exit interviews is no help to HR practitioners looking to decrease retention rates. Furthermore, the pattern of attrition will just crop up again when the replacement employee comes in to work under the lousy boss. This cycle will perpetuate itself and never really goes away until the boss is removed from the position.

However, there are some tips in which HR practitioners can obtain a better interview. Some tips include ensuring utmost confidentiality, getting a third party or a neutral party to conduct the interviews, asking open-ended questions and

not having the line manager or supervisor involved during the exit interview and asking if the employee would like a company reference letter before the start of the interview.

HR practitioners should also not accept "politically correct" answers (especially if the staff in question has expressed unhappiness with the company before) and should do some gentle prodding in an attempt to uncover the real reason for their unhappiness and departure.

But more importantly, employers need to have an open mind, especially when it comes to criticisms. While criticisms may be harsh and difficult to swallow, but if there is a recurring pattern of the same old grouses, then perhaps HR needs to look inwards (and even at the company's management style) before they can design and execute retention plans.



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