

Stay Interviews Guidance and Sample Questions

What is a stay (retention) interview?

A stay interview is an interview conducted with current employees to assess their job satisfaction and understand why they are “staying” with WNMU. During a stay interview, you’ll ask your employee several questions to learn what your employee values about working at WNMU as well as what WNMU, or you as a manager, could do better to increase employee engagement and retention.

Why conduct stay interviews?

Relationships with supervisors have a strong impact on an employee’s choice to change jobs. Talking to your employees about their positions, what keeps them engaged, and what they would like to see changed are important conversations to have.

The benefits of conducting stay interviews:

- Helps you build trust with your employees
- Increases the communication between you and your employees
- Helps you discover hidden talents, skills or interests
- Shows your employees that you care about their thoughts and feelings about their jobs and work environment and that you are open to making changes that would bring them greater job satisfaction
- Shows you recognize and appreciate their loyalty and care about them - not just their performance
- Allows for a mutual conversation about their current stance on their work
- Gives you viable information needed to make positive changes within the workplace
- Allows you to see warning signs that indicate a key player needs more support or direction
- Develop professional development and retention plans for employees who may have low job satisfaction or are at risk of leaving
- Identify internal talent for leadership positions for succession planning
- Informs and energizes your recruitment strategies
- Over the long term, this practice can provide you with patterns and data related to your employee turnover rates

How to conduct effective stay interviews

1. Schedule stay interviews in advance and let your employees know when they can expect to be interviewed.
2. Let your employees know exactly what a stay interview is, why you are conducting them, and what to anticipate during the interview. Being open about the purpose of these interviews helps to build trust with employees and allows them to come to the interview with helpful answers and information.
3. Conduct stay interviews one-one-one, in a safe and comfortable environment. to help employees feel more comfortable and open. For example, rather than conducting interviews in your office with the door closed, consider conducting them in an open, but private, area or in a more casual setting offsite. The more comfortable employees feel during stay interviews, the more likely they are to be willing to answer questions and communicate in a positive and helpful way.
4. Ask the right questions. Sample questions are provided below and should be asked in a way that encourages employees to be open and honest, that shows you care about their opinion and that you will take their responses seriously. You can provide the questions to employees ahead of the meeting, which may allow them time to thoughtfully consider how to respond.
5. Express your appreciation for the employee and thank them for participating in the interview and for the work they do. Point out specific examples of behaviors or projects that you genuinely appreciate.
6. Follow up after the interviews. Following up shows that you appreciated their time and that you were truly listening.
7. Take notes during the interview and use the information gathered to make positive changes in the workplace. Take action on what you’ve learned as soon as the interviews are complete, which will show employees you are serious about their feedback and making improvements.

Best practices for stay interviews

- Avoid asking questions that would result in only a “yes” or “no” answer and be prepared with follow-up questions.
- Don’t combine stay interviews with performance reviews to ensure that the focus is solely on the employee’s work experience, needs, and perspective.
- Do not dismiss or trivialize an employee’s answers or opinions even if you do not agree with them.
- Communicate any changes made and show appreciation for their input.
- The objective of conducting stay interviews is to listen and be open to the employee’s perspective—not to negotiate, get defensive or argue the merits of a point.
- Avoid making promises or committing to changes prematurely.

What not to ask in a stay interview

Don’t ask questions that will make the employee uncomfortable or distrustful. Do not ask questions such as these:

- Do you feel you make enough money?
- Who do you like the most/least on the team?
- Are you thinking about looking for another job?
- Do you know of any colleagues who are thinking of leaving?
- Am I (the manager) doing a good job?
- What amount of money would keep you here?

Sample questions

The interview should feel like a casual conversation to gain understanding rather than a formal interview.

Question 1. What do you look forward to each day when you commute to work?

This question focuses employees on the present and their daily duties and challenges, rather than pay. Employees stay engaged because of their work relationships and how much they like what they do.

Probing questions:

- Give me an example.
- Tell me more about...
- Who do you look forward to working with the most?

Question 2. What are you learning here, and what do you want to learn?

This question invites employees to tell us about their development and career aspirations, if any.

Probing questions:

- What other jobs here are appealing to you?
- What skills do you think are required for those jobs?
- What skills would you need to build to qualify for those jobs?

Question 3. Why do you stay here?

The answer to this question will tell you what employee values most about their jobs.

Probing questions:

- Tell me more about why that is so important to you.
- Is that the only reason you stay, or are there others?
- If you had to pick one main reason, what would it be?

Question 4. When was the last time you thought about leaving us, and what prompted it?

The answer to this question will tell us the urgency and the reason why.

Probing questions:

- Tell me more about that. Who said what?
- What is something I can do to make that better for you?
- How important is that to you now on a scale of 1 to 10?

Question 5. What can I do to make your job better for you?

The answer to this question will likely tell you something about yourself as a manager. Avoiding defensiveness and staying receptive to feedback is critical.

Probing questions:

- Do I tell you when you do something well?
- Do I say and do things to help you do your job better?
- What are three ways I can be a better manager for you?

Follow Up

This is a great opportunity to create career, professional development, and succession plans for your employees. Are there ways you can directly influence, develop or assist the employee in their career goals? What actions can you take to ensure some of their needs are met? After the stay interview, be sure to follow up with the employee on some of the topics you discussed and how you can address them. Let them know what actions you are willing to take and a potential timeline. Follow-up is a crucial step; conducting stay interviews without follow-up can further employee disengagement.

How do I know if my department is ready for stay interviews?

If your department culture is one that promotes and fosters trust and open communication, your team is likely ready to accept stay interviews and go into them with an open mind and willingness to help. If not, your team may be wary and distrustful of the process, so it may be best to spend time working on improving communication and trust within your team before conducting stay interviews.

Final thoughts

The key objective is to find out what it takes to engage and retain employees at WNMU. This is your opportunity to reinforce and cultivate the core values of a healthy campus culture. This is also an opportunity for you to learn more and better understand the members of your team, what keeps them here, and what you can do to improve their job satisfaction and further their professional goals.

