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Exit interviews as a tool to reduce parting employees' complaints about their former employer and to ensure residual commitment

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Abstract

Purpose

According to previous research, exit interviews do not fulfil the purpose of generating useful feedback from parting employees. According to signaling theory, they might, however, serve a different purpose: to leave one last good impression on parting employees.

Design/methodology/approach

This idea was tested by surveying 164 German employees.

Findings

Consistent with arguments based on signaling theory, those who experienced an exit interview reported more residual affective commitment towards their former employer and less willingness to complain about it, and these effects were mediated by interpersonal fairness perceptions. In addition, the probability of having an exit interview was found to depend on the resignation style of employees.

Originality

This is the first study that proposes a signaling theory perspective of exit interviews and that links exit interviews with the literature on resignation styles.

Research limitations/implications

This new perspective on exit interviews can renew the interest in studying how organizations manage the offboarding process.

Practical implications

This study advises employers to conduct “exit conversations” (as two-way interactions rather than one-way interviews) and to carefully plan the exit phase.

Keywords: exit interviews, exit conversations; resignation styles; residual commitment; signaling; impression management

Introduction

Practitioners and academics do not seem to agree on the benefits of exit interviews – interviews to find out why employees resign and to use parting employees' feedback to improve organizations. Whereas researchers hold a negative view, suggesting them to be useless (e.g., Lefkowitz and Katz, 1969; Pearce, 2012; Zarandona and Camuso, 1985), practitioners continue to use them (see, e.g., Spain and Groysberg, 2016). The reason for the negative view in academia is that researchers have challenged the assumption that parting employees are truthful about their reasons for resignation, which empirical data suggest they are not (e.g., Lefkowitz and Katz, 1969; Zarandona and Camuso, 1985).

If we do not want to attribute practitioners' use of exit interviews to a “stubborn reliance” (Highhouse, 2008, p. 333) on tradition and subjectivity or to an ignorance of academic literature (Fisher *et al.*, 2021; Rynes *et al.*, 2002), we must look further into why practitioners continue to use exit interviews. Building on signaling theory (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011) and a qualitative study conducted by Kulik *et al.* (2015), we argue that offering a conversation at the end of the employees' working time at an organization is a signal to parting employees that the organization wants the parting employee to continue to view the organization positively. This new perspective is tested with survey data from 164 German employees.

Our study makes three main contributions to the literature. First, we show how much can be gained by applying signaling theory (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011) as a new theoretical perspective to exit interviews. Second, we link the idea of exit interviews with the evolving literatures on residual commitment (the commitment to a former employer, Breitsohl and Ruhle, 2013) and on resignation styles (Klotz and Bolino, 2016). Finally, this study contributes to the field of human resource management by (hopefully) reviving research on exit interviews as a phenomenon that has been neglected for a long time.

Review of Literature

Turnover is costly for organizations because replacing employees requires organizations to invest resources into the recruitment, socialization, and training processes. Although some turnover can be beneficial for an organization if non-fitting employees leave, meta-analytical evidence points towards a predominantly negative relationship between turnover rates and organizational performance (Park and Shaw, 2013). Turnover costs are particularly high when there is a labor shortage, for example because an economy is in a boom phase or because working conditions in an industry are not that attractive for potential applicants.

To understand turnover, organizations may use what is typically called exit interviews: Departing employees are interviewed about their motivations for leaving (e.g., Givens-Skeaton and Ford, 2018). This interview typically happens at the end of their time as an employee, and the hope is to get feedback from the departing employees. This feedback helps to identify current challenges in the workplace (e.g., unfilled training needs or a harsh climate in a particular organizational division) that if remedied, will prevent other employees from leaving (Givens-Skeaton and Ford, 2018). Exit interviews might be conducted by the manager of the departing employee, someone from the human resource department, or an external consultant.

However, research has questioned how useful the feedback obtained in exit interviews is. For example, Lefkowitz and Katz (1969) compared the reasons for leaving given in exit interviews with the reasons mentioned in follow-up questionnaires later and found only weak convergence – in fact, parting employees appeared to withhold information and their opinions during the exit interview and distorted their parting reasons in a socially desirable way. Such response distortion was also reported by other researchers from the US (e.g., Feinberg and Jeppeson, 2000; Hinrichs, 1975; Zarandona and Camuso, 1985; see also Miller, 1926/27) and by studies in other parts of the world (Johns, 2016; Kulik *et al.*, 2015; Williams *et al.*, 2008).

Departing employees might prefer to speak about topics for which they have positive feelings and conceal negative experiences (Giacalone and Duhon, 1991).

Signaling Theory as a New Theoretical Perspective on Exit Interviews

Previous research on exit interviews has predominantly focused on the question of whether organizations can trust the feedback they receive from resigning employees in these interviews. Although this research has resulted in important knowledge about exit interviews, we argue that alternative perspectives on exit interviews are not only possible but also necessary to better understand this phenomenon. In particular, we propose that it is fruitful to apply signaling theory (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011; Spence, 1973) to exit interviews.

Signaling theory is a very general theory stemming from economics (Spence, 1973) and biology (Zahavi, 1975) that has now been used in many other fields, including management (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011). Signaling theory investigates communication situations in which two parties that have to or want to interact (i.e., two signalers) exchange signals that may or may not be perceived as credible (i.e., both send and receive signals that communicate a certain unobservable quality). Importantly, signaling theory assumes (a) information asymmetry, meaning some pieces of information are only known by one party, and other pieces only by the other party; and (b) only partly overlapping interests, meaning that sharing certain pieces of information might be more beneficial for one party than for the other.

If applied to exit interviews, signaling theory predicts that both sides will send signals of interest: parting employees to soon-to-be-former employers and soon-to-be-former employers to parting employees. The idea that parting employees send signals to the organization for which they had worked is consistent with previous research showing that parting employees tend to provide an overly positive description of their work experiences (e.g., Lefkowitz and Katz, 1969; Giacalone and Duhon, 1991; Williams *et al.*, 2008). Whereas

organizations are most likely interested in credible, honest feedback, parting employees might rather be interested in leaving a positive final positive impression in case of future interactions.

That organizations use exit interviews to send signals of interest to parting employees also follows from signaling theory (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011) because organizations are likely interested in ensuring residual affective commitment (the commitment felt towards an employer after having left; Breitsohl and Ruhle, 2013, 2016) and consequently re-hiring employees (or at least in having the possibility to re-hire). Re-hiring is often attractive for organizations because re-hiring reduces recruitment, socialization, and training costs (Apy and Ryckman, 2014). Re-hired employees, also called boomerang employees, also seem to stay longer once re-hired (Booth-LeDoux *et al.*, 2019), and organizations often hope that re-hired employees perform better (Swider *et al.*, 2017; but see Arnold *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, organizations might also send signals to prevent former employees from talking badly about the organization. If people complain about their former employer, this might not only damage the reputation of the organization among potential customers but might also reduce the attractiveness of the organizations for other potential applicants (negative word-of-mouth, Van Hove, 2014). Keeping the numbers of complaints low is also often a goal in situations where organizations lay off their employees (e.g., Richter *et al.*, 2018; Wood and Karau, 2009). Thus, signaling theory predicts that organizations will engage in impression management towards parting employees, and this would also be consistent with new research showing other instances in which organizations engage in impression management (e.g., in hiring situations: Wilhelmy *et al.*, 2016; Langer *et al.*, 2019). Initial evidence on the broader range of purposes for exit interviews comes from the qualitative interviews Kulik *et al.* (2015) conducted. For instance, one of their interviewees mentioned (p. 901) that the manager “said all the right things” in the exit interview so that the

interviewee (a documents controller) later “came and just helped them with processing all the documents.”

Such an exit interview should increase employees’ perceptions of being treated fairly during the parting process. If an exit interview gives parting employees an opportunity to voice their concerns, positive feelings they might still have for this employer, or whatever topic they like to raise, this should be perceived as a fair act on behalf of the employer. Such acts of interpersonal fairness would have a positive influence on employees’ attitudes (Colquitt, 2001). Previous research in the context of layoffs has already shown that fairness perceptions are an important process variable – for instance, fairness perceptions mediated the effect of respect in a layoff meeting on anger experienced by the laid-off employee (Richter *et al.*, 2018) and the effect of layoff training on the willingness to complain (Richter *et al.*, 2016).

Taking stock of these arguments, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Compared to employees that did not have an exit interview, employees that had an exit interview will report (a) higher residual affective commitment and (b) lower willingness to complain, and these effects will be (c) mediated by greater perceived interpersonal fairness during the parting.

Signaling theory (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011) can also be used to predict that organizations’ willingness to send signals will depend on the way employees have communicated their resignation, because if parting employees used a positive style (e.g., expressed their gratitude), this can be understood as a signal that parting employees are particularly open to the possibility of being re-hired. Thus, it is more beneficial for an organization to send signals of interest to those who have a higher probability of coming back. Klotz and Bolino (2016) recently established a resignation taxonomy of resignation styles that differentiates between positive and negative styles. This taxonomy differentiates between three positive styles (“grateful goodbye,” “in the loop,” and “by the book”) and four negative

styles (“avoidant,” bridge burning,” “impulsive quitting,” and “perfunctory”). If parting employees use the “grateful goodbye” style, they express their gratitude for having worked at the organization and often try to minimize the disruption their resignation might cause. Parting employees using the “in the loop” style inform their managers about their plans to leave so that a later resignation does not surprise the organization. If employees leave “by the book,” they approach their managers (primarily in a face-to-face meeting), tell them about the decision, and explain why they are leaving. If people do not tell their supervisors directly that they are resigning (i.e., just inform others or write an email), this is the “avoidant” resignation style. If employees leave in anger and even insult their managers or otherwise harm the organization, this is the “bridge burning” style. If someone’s resignation is characterized by a spontaneous decision without any prior notice, this is referred to as the “impulsive quitting” style. Finally, if employees meet their manager but only express their decision to resign without giving reasons, then Klotz and Bolino (2016) call this the “perfunctory” resignation style. Klotz and Bolino (2016) showed that supervisors show different emotional reactions depending on the resignation style used by employees. “Grateful goodbye,” “in the loop,” or “by the book” resignations styles elicit positive affect, whereas the others styles elicit negative affect. To summarize, the resignation style taxonomy of Klotz and Bolino (2016) can be combined with signaling theory (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011) to argue that employees who resign using a positive style have a higher probability of being offered an exit interview in comparison to those who use negative styles. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: The probability of an exit interview is higher if employees’ resignation style is positive compared to if it is negative.

Method

Context

The data were collected in Germany, a country with specific regulations regarding termination of jobs. In particular, German employees often continue working after resigning for a considerable time period – up to six months after handing their resignation in some sectors (e.g., according to the current German collective labor agreement for the public service [“Tarifvertrag für den öffentlichen Dienst”]; Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, 2019). Furthermore, employees who handed in their resignation are sometimes suspended from work on full pay (“Freistellung” in German; sometimes described in Anglo-Saxon countries with the euphemism “garden leave” because these employees are typically not allowed to work for other organizations either and thus have ample to time to work in their garden; see Coulthard, 2009, and Sullivan, 2016). Although such suspension is a costly employer reaction, it is sometimes considered necessary to, for instance, prevent the leakage of internal knowledge. Furthermore, some employees try to avoid coming to work by calling in sick.

Sample

Given that all sampling strategies have their the advantages and disadvantages (see, e.g., Highhouse and Gillespie, 2009; Landers and Behrend, 2015; Wheeler *et al.*, 2014), we decided to find participants using personal contacts and social network sites for two main reasons. First, such a sampling strategy allows for anonymous and broad sampling (i.e., not only from a small number of organizations), which seems particularly important for studying a sensitive topic such as a resignation. Second, contacts in organizations who could provide researchers with email address have only addresses of current employees but not of former employees because former employees’ email addresses are nearly always discontinued by the employer.

We obtained data from 165 German employees who voluntarily participated without any rewards. Participants had to have experience with voluntarily leaving an organization. To identify careless responses in our online data (Meade and Craig, 2012), we controlled for participants' self-reported diligence and excluded one participant who explicitly stated their data should not be used (using an item taken from Meade and Craig, 2012). Of the remaining 164 participants, 67 participants reported the existence of an exit interview (40.9%), and a sensitivity power analysis (using G*Power, Faul *et al.*, 2007, and assuming an alpha error of .05 and a beta error of .20) revealed that such a sample size was sufficient to detect an effect size (i.e., Cohen's *d*) of .40 and greater. Furthermore, this sampling size allowed us to test moderate mediation effects according to the sample size suggestions of Fritz and MacKinnon (2007).

Descriptive information about the participants can be found in Table I (including reasons why participants left their job). We also collected information about the exit interview if applicable. If employees reported the existence of an exit interview, these interviews typically took place either on the last day (37.3%, $n = 25$) or the second to last day (23.9%, $n = 16$). In most cases (80.6%, $n = 54$), exit interviews were conducted by the direct supervisor. Exit interviews took on average 26.3 minutes ($SD = 28.2$). The extent to which typical topics were covered in these interviews is depicted in Figure 1. In addition, Figure 2 describes activities initiated by the supervisor, the organization, and colleagues as well as activities initiated by the parting employee.

Data was collected in April and May of 2017. Ethical review was not required for this study in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The data of this study are available on request from the first author but are not publicly available because participants of this study did not give their explicit approval for their data to be shared publicly.

Measures

Participants rated all measures on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree” unless otherwise mentioned.

Residual affective commitment was measured with five items that were developed on the basis of Allen and Meyer’s (1990) affective commitment scale (for a German translation, see Schmidt *et al.*, 1998; see also Breitsohl and Ruhle, 2016) and that included the following items: “I would be very happy to work again for this company,” “I still feel committed to this company,” “I am proud that I was part of this company in the past,” “I still have a strong feeling of belonging to this company,” and “I think that my values still fit to the values of this company.” Cronbach Alpha for this scale was .91. Furthermore, Breitsohl and Ruhle (2016) reported that their scale highly correlated with the intention to return and the likelihood of recommending the previous employer to others, indicating the construct validity of this scale.

Willingness to complain was measured with four items adapted from a scale developed by Wood and Karau (2009) (for a German version see Richter *et al.*, 2018). The items were adapted by changing the subjunctive form to an indicative past form and by specifying that the former employer was meant (e.g., “I would complain to friends about this employer” became “I complained to friends about my former employer”). One item in this scale is reverse-coded. Cronbach Alpha for this scale was .82. Wood and Karau (2009) reported some construct validity evidence for this scale (i.e., if a termination interview mentioned positive attributes of a laid-off employee, the willingness to complain of this employee was reduced), and in Richter *et al.* (2018), willingness to complain was strongly correlated with anger and (negatively) with fairness perceptions.

Interpersonal fairness during the parting was measured with an adapted four-item scale developed by Colquitt (2001) (for a German translation see Maier *et al.*, 2007). The adaptation was to add “during the parting” (e.g., “During the parting, I felt treated in a polite

way” and “During the parting, I felt treated with respect”). Cronbach Alpha for this scale was .95.

A confirmatory factor analysis showed a good fit for a three-dimensional factor model in which each latent construct (residual affective commitment, willingness to complain, and interpersonal fairness) loaded on the respective items: The comparative fit index (CFI) was .96, the non-normed fit index (NNFI) was .95, and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) was .06, with $\chi^2(27) = 115.71, p < .001$ (see Kline, 2011). In this confirmatory factor analysis, we included no cross-loadings and no correlated error terms.

Additional items

Participants were asked whether there was an exit interview (1 = yes vs. 0 = no). Furthermore, we developed a list of items (see Table II) capturing the seven resignation styles included in the Klotz and Bolino (2016) taxonomy, using the definitions proposed by these authors.

In addition, participants were asked several questions about the exit situation, including topics in the exit interview (if it existed) and other activities around the exit (for more details, see the first paragraph of the results section). These questions were added to enrich the description of the situation.

Statistical analyses

We analyzed our data using SPSS for Windows (version 27.0, IBM Corp, 2020), extended by Amos (Version 26.0; Arbuckle, 2019) for the aforementioned confirmatory factor analysis and by the SPSS macro PROCESS (version 3.4), developed by Hayes (2018), for testing mediation models. Hayes (2018) recommended bootstrapping for such mediation analyses because it does not assume a normal sampling distribution and has more statistical power than other approaches to test mediation. His macro generates bias-corrected percentile bootstrapped confidence intervals for each indirect effect (in our case with 10000 resamples), and the significance of an indirect path is indicated when the 95% confidence interval does

not contain zero. Similarly, the PROCESS macro reports the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the direct effect, and if they do not contain zero, this signals partial mediation (and if they do, full mediation). Furthermore, Hayes' macro also reports the results for the Sobel test as an additional (but less recommended) test for mediation.

Results

Hypothesis testing

Compared to employees who did not have exit interviews, employees who had exit interviews reported more residual commitment ($M_{\text{exit interview}} = 2.93$ vs. $M_{\text{no exit interview}} = 2.37$; a d of 0.52) and less willingness to complain ($M_{\text{exit interview}} = 2.03$ vs. $M_{\text{no exit interview}} = 2.30$; a d of -0.31), which supports Hypotheses 1a and 1b (see Table III).

To test the mediation Hypothesis 1c, we run mediation analyses separately for each of the two dependent variables, residual commitment and willingness to complain, based on the correlations reported in Table IV. Table V reports the mediation results regarding residual commitment and Table VI shows the mediation results regarding willingness to complain. Both mediation analyses are visualized in Figure 3. As can be seen, there was evidence for a partial mediation of the effects of exit interviews (yes vs. no) on residual commitment through interpersonal fairness, indicated by the drop in the regression coefficient linking the independent variable (i.e., exit interview yes vs. no) and the dependent variable (i.e., commitment) from 0.56 to 0.30. Furthermore, there was evidence for full mediation of the effects of exit interviews (yes vs. no) on willingness to complain: The regression coefficient dropped from -0.27 to -0.07, with the latter not being significant anymore. In addition, Sobel test estimates were significant for both mediations (for residual commitment: $z = 2.61$, $p < .01$; for willingness to complain: $z = -2.61$, $p < .01$), which is consistent with the findings obtained through bootstrapping. In addition, controlling for gender (cf. Becker *et al.*, 2016) did not change results for both mediations (details available upon request from the first author). Together, these results support Hypothesis 1c.

To test Hypothesis 2, we categorized the resignations styles as either positive or negative using the Klotz and Bolino (2016) taxonomy. Participants with a positive resignation style were more likely to experience an exit interview (i.e., 60 out of 131) than those with a negative resignation style (i.e., 7 out of 33) (see Table VII). Testing revealed a ϕ coefficient of .20, $p < .05$, which supports Hypothesis 2.

Discussion

This study aimed to explain the gap between academics' negative views of exit interviews (e.g., Lefkowitz and Katz, 1969; Pearce, 2012) and practitioners' use of them (see, e.g., Spain and Groysberg, 2016) by using arguments derived from signaling theory (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011). More precisely, we argue that organizations offer exit interviews to signal that they are interested in ensuring employees' residual affective commitment and reducing their willingness to complain. Our empirical results were consistent with these arguments. Furthermore, we found that these effects were mediated by interpersonal fairness during the parting process. We also argued that organizations send such signals particularly to parting employees whose resignation style (Klotz and Bolino, 2016) is positive, and this was also supported by the results.

Signaling theory (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011) had not been previously applied to exit interviews, but our results show that using this theoretical perspective is a fruitful way to understand the phenomenon of exit interviews. An exit interview can be considered an interaction event in which both parties – soon-to-be-former employers and soon-to-be-former employees – exchange communication signals that might be partly honest and partly not, because both parties like to leave a positive impression. For example, the organization might try to re-hire the employee in future or may just want to prevent the parting employee from speaking badly about the company to others. Parting employees might be preparing to re-apply in the future or may just want to get a positive recommendation letter for a future job.

These results challenge the negative view of exit interviews that is found in the academic literature (e.g., Feinberg and Jeppeson, 2000; Lefkowitz and Katz, 1969; Williams *et al.*, 2008; Hinrichs, 1975). Although our results do not question the older finding that parting employees tell only parts of the truth for why they leave (in fact, this is consistent with a signaling perspective on exit interviews), our results suggest that human resource departments should not use exit interviews to elicit reasons for leaving, but should rather consider them as a tool that (a) results in a better public reputation and (b) allows for a fruitful relationship even after the end of employment. This relationship could result in people returning (as “boomerang employees”, Booth-LeDoux *et al.*, 2019) or in higher willingness to buy products from the previous employer (Iyer and Day, 1998).

Our mediation results indicate why exit interviews have such positive effects: because parting employees have the impression that they are treated fairly. The importance of interpersonal fairness has already been found in other contexts, with the context of layoffs being particularly relevant here because that is another situation in which employees leave the organization (Richter *et al.*, 2018; Richter *et al.*, 2016). This study goes beyond previous findings and shows that it is crucial that employees who have resigned themselves feel fairly treated, which then causes them to stay committed to the former employer. In addition, these results support ideas in the organizational impression management literature (Wilhelmy *et al.*, 2016) that organizations sometimes engage in impression management to signal fairness. Although Wilhelmy *et al.* (2016) focused on fairness signals in hiring situations, organizations might also signal fairness when employees leave.

Furthermore, our research also shows that parting employees can influence the probability of having an exit interview by using a positive (vs. a negative) resignation style (based on the categorization proposed by Klotz and Bolino, 2016). If they resign “by the book,” by keeping their supervisors “in the loop,” or by even stressing how grateful they were for being employed here (“grateful goodbye”), they seem to signal that they are interested in a

continuation of a relationship and this increases their probability of having an exit interview in comparison to other, more negative resignation styles (i.e., if they leave impulsively, in anger, without explaining reasons, or without getting in personal contact with their supervisors).

Interestingly, the frequencies of resignation styles in our German sample were fairly similar to the US samples reported by Klotz and Bolino (2016). The main similarity is that the “by the book” resignation style was the most common style in Germany and in the US (for a comparison: between 31% and 43% in Klotz and Bolino’s US samples), and “impulsive quitting” and “bridge burning” were rather rare in both countries (between 1% and 10% in the US samples). The main difference seems to be the “avoidant” style, which seems to be more common in the US (up to 16% in one US sample) than in Germany (around 5% in our sample). This dissimilarity could be due to the fact that avoiding supervisors is difficult in Germany, because Germany employees often come to work for a long time after handing in their resignation letter. Nevertheless, it should be noted that neither the German, nor the US samples were representative, which limits generalizability.

Practical implications

For organizations, this study implies that if they are interested in managing the exit process in a way that leaves a good impression, they should (a) offer exit interviews more often and (b) likely rename it as an “exit conversation” (Kulik *et al.*, 2015, p. 893). Our results also show the potential of exit conversations is not fully realized because only a minority (41%) of the employees reported such an exit interview. This means that the chance to leave a good impression on parting employees was missed by more than half of the organizations. Even though losing employees can be disappointing considering the time and resources an organization invests in its employees and because of the investment needed for recruiting, socializing, and training new employees, organizations should employ a long-term frame of thinking and search for ways to continue the relationship with parting employees. To

do so, it seems crucial to engage in a conversation where both parties can voice their views, instead of an interview in which the employer asks and the employee answers, and if it is a conversation and not a one-sided “interview”, the expression “exit conversation” of Kulik *et al.* (2015, p. 893) seems appropriate. (We should add that this point is not relevant in German because “Austrittsinterviews”, the literal translation of “exit interviews”, is a rarely used expression, whereas other terms are more common – more common are “Austrittsgespräch”, translatable as “exit talk”, and “Abschiedsgespräch”, translatable as “farewell talk”.)

Even worse than an exit interview would be an exit survey in which employers ask parting employees for the resignation reasons in a written or online questionnaire (see, e.g., Giacalone *et al.*, 1997). Not only does this prevent the employee from starting a conversation, it will also most likely be perceived as less interpersonal than any face-to-face communication. This might result in lower interpersonal fairness perceptions (Colquitt, 2001), which played a major role as a mediator in this study.

More generally, this study underlines the importance of managing the offboarding process, in particular in countries like Germany where employees often continue working for their employer after handing in a resignation letter (and where we collected our data). Whereas researchers and practitioners seem to have devoted much attention to onboarding process (e.g., Bauer *et al.*, 2007; Fang *et al.*, 2010), a comprehensive human resource management approach should also keep an eye on the handling of the offboarding process, especially given the probability of re-hiring former employees (e.g., Apy and Ryckman, 2014; Booth-LeDoux *et al.*, 2019)

Limitations and future research

As all studies, this study is not without limitations. First, readers should keep in mind that there are many legal differences between countries regarding the resignation (and firing) of employees and that our German data might not generalize to other countries. For example, if the time period between announcing the resignation and the last day of work is shorter than

in Germany, managers also have less time to get over their disappointment (or even anger) of losing a good employee, which likely makes it harder to engage in activities that ensure a fruitful relationship beyond the departure. Furthermore, the practice of “garden leave” where employees are suspended from work on full pay after their resignation (see also Coulthard, 2009, and Sullivan, 2016) likely also varies between countries, although this practice has yet to receive substantial research attention. Future research should aim to gather samples from different work or cultural contexts and examine the influence of these situational factors. A second limitation is the use of a cross-sectional design. Ideally, future research will use longitudinal designs to follow up on employees who have left their employer, with or without an exit interview. A third limitation is the rather small research sample ($N = 164$), which is additionally limited by a comparatively low mean age. If a future research study replicates or, even better, extends this study, data from a larger and more representative sample should be collected. Fourth, we do not know whether participants’ answers were biased by social desirability (cf. McCrae and Costa, 1983). If researchers want to ensure that parting employees voice their views in a honest way, they could use specialized techniques that were developed for the assessment of sensitive issues such as the randomized response technique (see, e.g., König *et al.*, 2020). Fifth, it should be kept in mind that a correlational design cannot prove that exit interviews causally influence former employees’ residual commitment and their willingness to complain – establishing causal relationships needs experimental designs.

The signaling perspective on exit interviews opens many avenues for future research in this area. According to signaling theory (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011), receivers of signals try to determine how honest signals are (e.g., Brosy *et al.*, 2021). In an exit interview, some statements are likely biased towards the positive side. For example, when our participants report that the exit interview was used to give performance feedback, one might wonder (and study) how honest this feedback really is because mentioning negative

performance aspects might ruin the positive impression an organization wants to make on the parting employee.

Conclusions

This article shows that it is time to shift from the study of how truthful responses are in an exit interview, to exploring how a carefully planned offboarding phase, including an exit conversation, leads to long-term benefits for organizations because it allows the employee-organization relationship to continue beyond the employee's tenure with the organization. This is a new perspective based on signaling theory (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012; Connelly *et al.*, 2011), and we hope this study will stimulate research on this important topic.

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Table I*Sample description*

Variable	% (n)
Gender	
Female	61.62% (101)
Male	38.4% (63)
Highest school education within the German system	
Lower secondary general education certificate (“Hauptschulabschluss” in German)	1.2% (2)
General certificate of secondary education (“Mittlere Reife”)	14.6% (24)
A degree qualifying for entering a university of applied sciences (“Fachhochschulabschluss”)	25.0% (41)
University entrance qualification (“Abitur”)	59.1% (97)
Highest tertiary-education education	
An apprenticeship degree (“Lehre” in German)	37.8% (62)
Bachelor degree from a university of applied sciences (“Fachhochschule”)	9.1% (15)
Master degree from a university of applied sciences	3.7% (6)
Bachelor degree from a university	24.4% (40)
Master degree from a university	13.4% (22)
No tertiary-education degree (so far)	11.0% (18)
Invalid answer	0.6% (1)
Reasons for resigning from the job ^a	
Missing career options	33.5% (55)
Working condition	32.3% (53)
Pay	29.3% (48)
The work itself	27.4% (45)
Supervisor	18.9% (31)
The organization as a whole	15.9% (26)
Colleagues	10.4% (17)
Various other reasons	41.5% (68)
What participants did between announcing their resignation and their last day on the job	
Continued working (including 29 who first continued working and then took holidays)	78.7% (129)
Took holidays	9.8% (16)
Suspended from work on full pay (“Freistellung”)	5.5% (9)
Sick leave	4.9% (8)

Note. $N = 164$, average age = 29.94 years ($SD = 6.22$; four people with missing data).

^a = several answers possible

Table II*Participants' Resignation Styles (Using the Taxonomy of Klotz & Bolino, 2016)*

Style	Item	<i>n</i>	Percentage
By the book	I approached my supervisor for a personal meeting, announced my resignation and explained the reasons for it.	87	53.0%
Grateful goodbye	I announced my resignation to my supervisor in a personal meeting and expressed my gratitude. I also mentioned that I will try to minimize the disruption my resignation might cause.	36	22.0%
Perfunctory	I approached my supervisor for a short meeting to announce my resignation. I did not (yet) explain the reasons for it.	12	7.3%
Impulsive quitting	Suddenly and without advance warning, I announced my resignation to my supervisor in a personal meeting.	9	5.5%
Avoidant	I only handed in a written document announcing my resignation or gave it to someone from human resources.	9	5.5%
In the loop	I announced my formal resignation to my supervisor in a personal meeting after having informed him/her beforehand that I am looking for job alternatives.	8	4.9%
Bridge burning	I announced my resignation to my supervisor in a personal meeting. During this, I flew into such a rage that I insulted the supervisor or the organization.	3	1.8%

Note. *N* = 164. Items were translated from German by the first author.

Table III*Comparing Participants with and without Exit Interviews*

Variables	Exit interview (<i>n</i> = 67)		No exit interview (<i>n</i> = 97)		<i>t</i> -test	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (162)	<i>d</i>
Residual commitment	2.93	0.99	2.37	1.14	3.42 ^{††}	0.52
Willingness to complain	2.03	0.80	2.30	0.94	-1.94 [†]	-0.31
Interpersonal fairness	4.19	1.12	3.67	1.21	2.81 ^{††}	0.44

Note. [†]*p* < .05, one-tailed; ^{††}*p* < .01, one-tailed.

Table IV*Intercorrelations of Variables and Means and Standard Deviations*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Exit interview: yes vs. no	.41	.49	-		
2. Residual commitment	2.60	1.11	.25**		
3. Willingness to complain	2.19	0.89	-.15 ^a	-.64**	
4. Interpersonal fairness	3.88	1.20	.22**	.56**	-.52**

Note. Exit interview: yes coded as 1, no as 0. *N* = 164.

^a*p* < .055, two-tailed; **p* < .05, two-tailed; ***p* < .01, two-tailed.

Table V

Regression Results for the Mediation of Interpersonal Fairness on the Relationship between Exit Interview (Yes vs. No) and Residual Commitment

Model	R^2	Coefficient	SE	p	95% CI
Effects of the independent variable on the mediator					
Exit interview: yes vs. no \rightarrow Interpersonal fairness	.05	0.52	0.19	< .01	[0.16, 0.89]
Effects of the independent variable and the mediator on the dependent variable					
Exit interview: yes vs. no \rightarrow Residual commitment (i.e., direct effect c')		0.30	0.15	< .05	[0.01, 0.59]
Interpersonal fairness \rightarrow Residual commitment		0.49	0.07	< .01	[0.36, 0.63]
Indirect effects					
Indirect effect via interpersonal fairness		0.26	0.09	-	[0.08, 0.45]

Note. CI = bias-corrected confidence interval. Coefficients are unstandardized. Exit interview: yes coded as 1, no as 0.

$n_{\text{with exit interview}} = 67$, $n_{\text{without exit interview}} = 97$.

Table VI

Regression Results for the Mediation of Interpersonal Fairness on the Relationship between Exit Interview (Yes vs. No) and Willingness to Complain

Model	R^2	Coefficient	SE	p	95% CI
Effects of the independent variable on the mediator					
Exit interview: yes vs. no → Interpersonal fairness	.05	0.52	0.19	< .01	[0.16, 0.89]
Effects of the independent variable and the mediator on the dependent variable					
Exit interview: yes vs. no → Willingness to complain (i.e., direct effect c')		-0.07	0.12	.55	[-0.31, 0.17]
Interpersonal fairness → Willingness to complain		-0.38	0.05	< .01	[-0.49, -0.28]
Indirect effects					
Indirect effect via interpersonal fairness		-0.20	0.08	-	[-0.36, -0.06]

Note. CI = bias-corrected confidence interval. Coefficients are unstandardized. Exit interview: yes coded as 1, no as 0.

$n_{\text{with exit interview}} = 67$, $n_{\text{without exit interview}} = 97$.

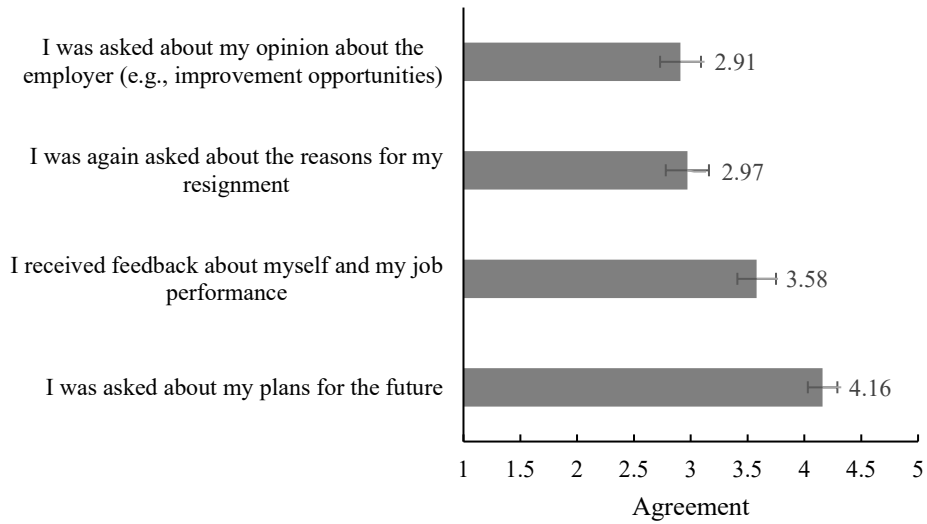
Table VII

Contingency Table Resignation Style (Positive vs.

Negative) × Exit Interview (Yes vs. No)

		Resignation style	
		Positive	Negative
Exit interview	Yes	60	7
	No	71	26

Note. N = 164.

Figure 1*Topics Raised in the Exit Interviews*

Note. Participants ($n_{\text{with exit interview}} = 67$) answered on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree.” Error bars depict standard errors.

Figure 2

Activities before the Exit as Reported by the Participants (N = 164)

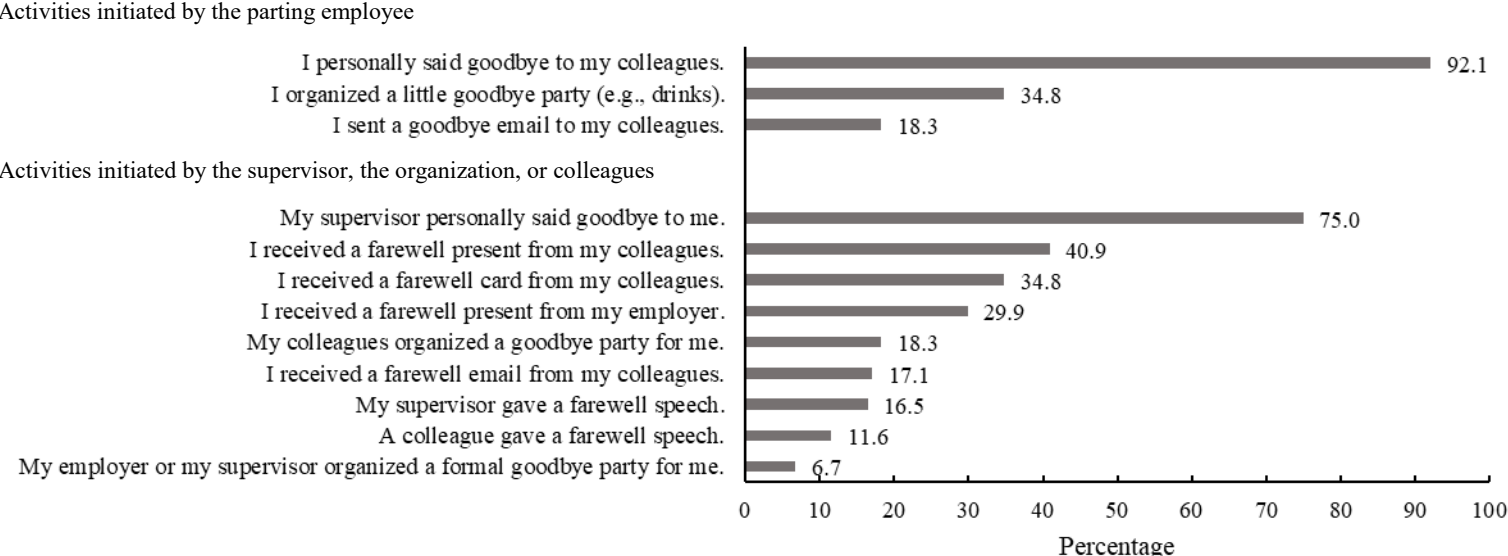
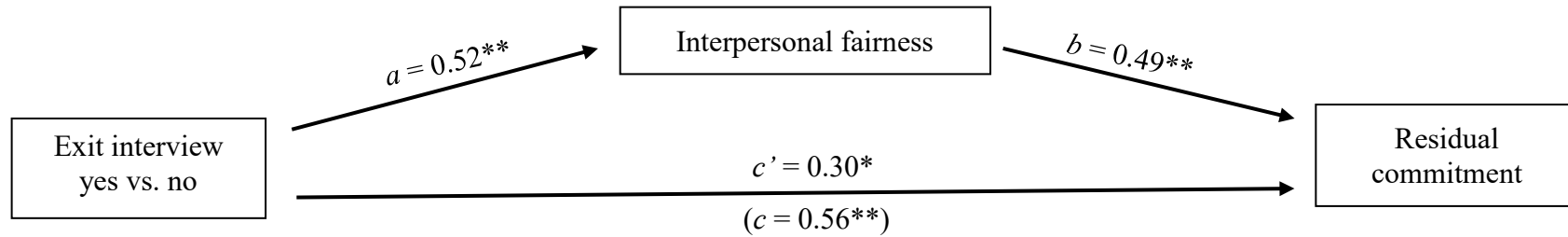


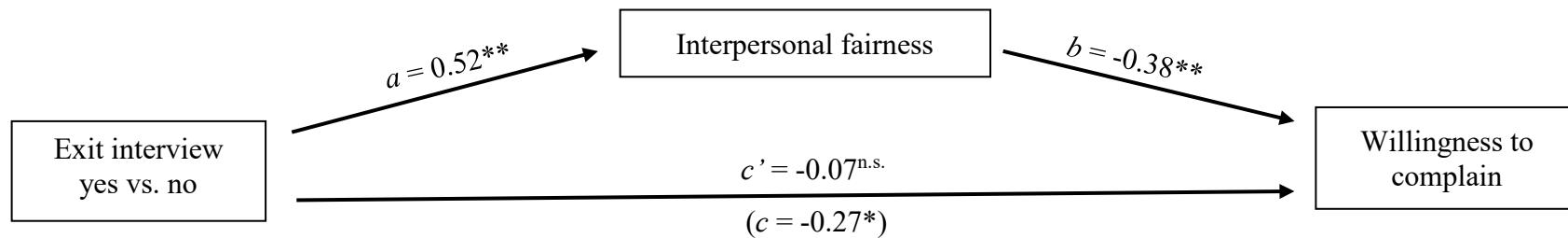
Figure 3

Mediation of the Relationship between Exit Interview (Yes vs. No) on (a) Residual Commitment and (b) Willingness to Complain

a)



b)



Note. Coefficients are unstandardized. Exit interview: yes coded as 1, no as 0. $n_{\text{with exit interview}} = 67$, $n_{\text{without exit interview}} = 97$.

* $p < .05$, two-tailed; ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

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