

# **Exit Interviews: The Impact of Perceived Sensitivity and Perceived Threat on Individuals' Willingness to Disclose**

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*For the results of exit interviews to make a difference they must reveal the true causes of voluntary turnover. Obtaining accurate exit interview data is challenging because departing employees often distort responses. This study had two purposes: (1) to create a scale of "information type" whereby potential reasons for leaving were evaluated for degree of sensitivity and threat; and (2) to determine whether information that is perceived as highly sensitive or threatening would be less likely to be disclosed. Our findings indicate that job context is perceived as less sensitive and threatening than interpersonal issues, which are less likely to be disclosed.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Although the term exit interview means different things to different organizations (Ahr & Ahr, 2000), it is generally thought of as a meeting between a departing employee and a representative of the organization. It is intended to enhance the organization's ability to retain valuable employees and to improve its overall functioning. To do this, exit interviews must yield enough information to allow the organization to correct its actual and potential problem areas. The primary purposes of this meeting are to gain an understanding of the departing employee's perception of his or her work experience (Ahr & Ahr, 2000; Dworak, 1983; Saville & Hill, 1989) and uncover his or her reasons for leaving (e.g. Collier, 1987; Embrey, Mondy, & Noe, 1979; Feldman & Klaas, 1999; Giacalone, Knouse, & Montagliani, 1997; Habbe, 1952; Hellweg & Phillips, 1981, May; Heneman & Kern, 1956; Hinrichs, 1975; Knouse, Beard, Pollard, & Giacalone, 1996). Exit interviews may take the form of structured or semi-structured interviews, telephone interviews, or questionnaires. For the purposes of this study, the term exit interview will be used generically to refer to both interviews and questionnaires/surveys.

Implementing and supporting an exit interview program can be both costly and time-consuming for the organization (Giacalone et al., 1997). It is still a project that is worth undertaking if truthful and comprehensive information regarding an employee's decision to quit can be obtained. Exit interviews have not been very successful in revealing accurate reasons behind turnover (Yourman, 1965), as many people keep the real reasons for departure to themselves (Schmidt, 1984).

Lefkowitz and Katz (1969) found that only 41% of participants gave the same reason for quitting after six months as they did at the time of their initial exit interview. Further, 14% of respondents initially cited “no specific reason”, but then cited specific reasons on the follow-up survey.

Hinrichs (1975) found that data obtained during exit interviews with company managers did not agree with data either from follow-up questionnaires or from external consultant interviews. In addition, although management issues were not cited as a reason for leaving in any of the company-conducted interviews, it was mentioned in 16% of the consultant interviews. Based on this finding, Hinrichs concluded that interviews conducted by company management are particularly poor at uncovering dissatisfaction with management.

Zarandona and Camuso (1985) compared exit interview responses given at the time of departure with responses obtained from an independent telephone survey conducted 18 months after separation. They found that during the initial exit interview participants were more likely to report salary and benefits, but less likely to report supervision, as reasons for leaving. The reverse was true for the telephone survey.

As illustrated by these studies, there is reason to be concerned about the accuracy and validity of exit interview data. The methodological limitations of these studies make it impossible to ascertain whether these differences were due to a) the method of data collection, b) the timing of data collection, c) the person or department responsible for collecting the data, or d) the nature of the information being discussed. It is clear that more research needs to be conducted in order to understand why there is a difference between an individual’s actual reasons for leaving and the reasons he or she provides during the exit interview. A thorough review of the extant literature uncovered several factors that could potentially impact an individual’s willingness to disclose. Some factors that could potentially impact a departing employee’s willingness to disclose are within the control of the organization and can be adjusted to improve the accuracy of exit interview data. Examples of such factors include who conducts the exit interview, the timing of the interview, and the method of data collection. Other factors, such as a departing employee’s perception of the sensitivity of the reason for leaving, cannot be controlled by the organization and present a significantly more intractable inhibition to securing accurate data. Therefore, in this study we focus specifically on the nature of the information being discussed as a reason for response distortion.

### **Response Distortion**

For exit interviews to have a significant impact on an organization’s functioning, they must get beneath the surface and uncover the real causes of voluntary turnover (Embrey et al., 1979; Knouse et al., 1996). One reason that it is difficult to obtain authentic responses to exit interview questions is that exit interviews are replete with opportunities for distortion (Giacalone, Stuckey, & Beard, 1996). Although there are many ways in which response distortion can occur, the most common types of distortion include changing the reason for leaving and decreasing the amount of detail provided.

Although it is unclear exactly why departing employees distort their responses, the literature suggests that these individuals sometimes provide inaccurate or incomplete information because either they do not consciously understand their reason for leaving (Harris, 1979) or because they are simply uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss their real reasons for leaving. It has been suggested that departing employees are more willing to disclose information about which they feel comfortable (Giacalone & Knouse, 1989; Giacalone et al., 1997; Lefkowitz & Katz, 1969), such as impersonal job conditions or extra-organizational issues. They are less willing to discuss personality conflicts with supervisors (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1991) or personal problems (Giacalone & Knouse, 1989). While decreasing the amount of detail provided is less egregious than providing a false reason for leaving, either type of response distortion is problematic. In both instances, the organization is provided with inaccurate information and will not be as effective in reducing turnover or improving overall functioning.

Recent studies have yielded additional information about exit interview disclosure. Gordon (2011) found that employees are more likely to disclose their reasons for leaving when the employee’s perception about the communication climate (general tone of relationships among individuals) is

positive. According to Gordon, “the closer the shared history between organizational members, the more the relationship begins to shape the individual’s behavior, including the content and style of their conversation”. This study also found that female employees are slightly more likely to disclose the real reasons for leaving than are male employees. Other factors to consider are whether the exit is really voluntary and whether the exiting employee has already secured a new job (Feldman & Klaas, 1999).

### **Hypothesis Development**

Despite serious concerns about the accuracy of exit interview data, there have been few scientific inquiries into the reasons for response distortion (Feldman & Klaas, 1999; Giacalone et al., 1997). In fact, Giacalone and his colleagues conducted the first systematic examination of the reasons for response distortion in 1996. Prior to this study, all explanations were merely speculative, based on common sense beliefs and post hoc interpretations (Giacalone et al., 1996).

If an organization hopes to enhance its effectiveness, it must obtain information regarding all areas in need of change, including information perceived as risky to disclose by the departing employee. One of the underlying assumptions of this research was that some types of information are, by their very nature, often perceived to be too sensitive or too threatening to share with the organization. If it were possible to identify the reasons for leaving that are most prone to distortion, then organizations could employ different data gathering techniques to ensure that accurate and complete information is obtained.

Given the lack of empirical research into the reasons for response distortion, the central purpose of this study was to examine whether individuals undergoing exit interviews provide incomplete or inaccurate information because they perceive their reasons for leaving are too sensitive or too threatening to share with the organization.

#### *Sensitivity*

A comprehensive review of the exit interview literature and an examination of existing exit interview protocols suggests that there are a variety of topics that might be discussed during an exit interview. The scant existing research suggests that the type of information being discussed does impact individuals’ willingness to disclose during an exit interview. For example, it has been suggested that departing employees are more likely to discuss salary and benefits (Giacalone & Knouse, 1989; Giacalone et al., 1997; Zarandona & Camuso, 1985) and training opportunities (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1991) than personality conflicts (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1991), personal problems (Giacalone & Knouse, 1989), or satisfaction with leadership (Giacalone, Elig, Ginexi, & Bright, 1995).

Previous research has found that departing employees tend to choose to discuss impersonal job conditions and non-interpersonal issues. They are less likely to discuss reasons for leaving that are personal or interpersonal in nature. Giacalone et al. (1997) found that participants would be prevented from answering truthfully if they were asked for information they perceived to be confidential. Giacalone and Knouse (1989) asserted that employees often choose to discuss impersonal job conditions over personal problems as the reason for leaving, in a bid to protect their privacy. LaFarge and Nurick (1993) reasoned that it requires more emotional energy to discuss personality conflicts with others than it does to discuss a lack of advancement or training opportunities. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis was generated.

*Hypothesis 1: Individuals will be more willing to disclose information when the exit interview topic is perceived as being non-sensitive and more reluctant to disclose information when the topic is perceived as being highly sensitive.*

#### *Threat*

According to Feldman and Klaas (1999), the decision regarding whether to provide accurate information during the exit interview is impacted by the perceived costs associated with speaking out. When assessing these costs, departing employees are likely to consider the repercussions for themselves, their coworkers, and their supervisors (e.g. Giacalone, 1989; Hinrichs, 1975; Zarandona &

Camuso, 1985). The most frequently cited costs of disclosure are retaliation in the form of negative recommendations to possible future employers (e.g. Collier, 1987; Feldman & Klaas, 1999; Giacalone & Duhon, 1991) or burned bridges resulting in an inability to work for the organization in the future (e.g. Embrey et al., 1979; Feldman & Klaas, 1999; Giacalone & Knouse, 1989).

Findings from two empirical studies support the assertion that the decision regarding disclosure depends on the perceived consequences of that disclosure. For example, Giacalone et al. (1997) found that participants would be prevented from answering truthfully if there was a possibility that they would suffer negative consequences. Feldman and Klaas (1999) found that participants indicated that they would be more likely to disclose if they were assured that they would be protected from negative employment references. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis was generated.

*Hypothesis 2: Individuals will be more willing to disclose information regarding a specific exit interview topic when the disclosure is perceived as being non-threatening and more reluctant to disclose information when disclosure is perceived as highly threatening.*

The primary goal of this research was to determine whether information that is perceived as highly sensitive or highly threatening would be less likely to be disclosed during the exit interview process. To accomplish this goal two studies were necessary. The purpose of Study 1 was to create a scale of “information type”, whereby the various types of information that could be provided during the exit interview were evaluated for sensitivity and threat. The objective of Study 2 was to test our hypotheses.

## **STUDY 1: SCALING INFORMATION**

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

The participants were 94 evening Master of Business Administration (MBA) students attending a large northeastern university, of whom 55.3% were male and the average age was 32.27 ( $SD = 7.59$ ) years. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (79.8%).

The participants were employed in a wide range of industries, with an average of 9.98 years of full-time work experience ( $SD = 7.46$ ). It was important to select participants with work experience, as prior exit interview studies had used only students with no real-world work experience (Feldman & Klaas, 1999). Additional demographic data is presented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC FREQUENCIES (STUDY 1 AND STUDY 2)**

Variable			Study 1				Study 2	
	Mean	SD	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Mean	SD	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Store								
A							71	53.4
B							62	46.6
Gender								
Male			52	55.3			78	59.1
Female			42	44.7			54	40.9
Age (years)	32.27	7.59			35.65	12.88		
Race/Ethnicity								
Caucasian			75	79.8			111	86.0
Afr-Amer			9	9.6			11	8.5
Hispanic			2	2.1			2	1.6
Asian			3	3.2			1	.7
Multiracial			3	3.2			2	1.6
Other			2	2.1			2	1.6
Work Experience (yrs)	9.98	7.46						
Employment Status								
Full-time							81	61.8
Part-time							50	38.2
Organizational Tenure (years)	4.58	5.35			8.45	8.39		
Position Tenure (years)	3.10	3.87						
Organizational Sector								
Private			63	67.7				
Government			16	17.2				
Non-profit			12	12.9				
Self-employed			2	2.2				
Job Type								
Professional			38	40.8				
Managerial			21	22.6				
Technical			17	18.3				
Sales			8	8.6				
Executive			2	2.2				
Clerical			2	2.2				
Other			5	5.3				
Clerk							86	69.9
1st. clerk							23	18.7
Department Manager							14	11.4
Department								
Front end							35	30.7
Grocery							18	15.8
Deli							17	14.9

Variable	Study 1				Study 2			
	Mean	SD	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Mean	SD	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Bakery							13	11.4
Produce							11	9.6
Meat							9	7.9
General merchandise							4	3.5
Night crew							3	2.6
Floral							2	1.8
Seafood							2	1.8
Supervisory Responsibility								
Yes			49	52.1			56	42.4
No			45	47.9			76	57.6
Number supervised	11.45	23.90			20	31.2		
Time supervising (years)	5.10	5.85			8.19	8.09		
Pay classification								
Salaried			78	83.0				
Hourly			16	17.0				

Note. N = 94 for Study 1; N = 133 for Study 2.

### Procedure

Data for this study were collected using questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed to potential participants during class and returned in self-addressed, stamped envelopes to the researchers. A majority (76.5%) of the participants received extra credit for their participation in the study.

### Measures

#### Demographics

Participants were asked to provide demographic information including gender, age, race, full-time work experience, organizational tenure, job tenure, supervisory responsibilities, and pay classification.

#### Information Type

Participants were asked to read a series of 132 statements (see Table 2) that reflected possible reasons for voluntarily terminating an employment relationship and to rate these statements for perceived degree of sensitivity and perceived degree of threat. These statements were compiled from a thorough review of the exit interview and turnover literature and represented the most frequently mentioned reasons for voluntarily leaving a job. Example items included “I believe the salary paid to me was too low” and “The leadership of this organization is not trustworthy”.

Furthermore, the 132 statements were categorized into 14 workplace dimensions (see Table 2). These workplace dimensions were derived from published exit interview protocols and surveys and reflected areas commonly discussed during the exit interview process.

**TABLE 2**  
**MEANS AND VARIANCES FOR PERCEIVED SENSIBILITY AND PERCEIVED THREAT (STUDY 1)**

<b>Information Type Items by Workplace Dimension</b>	<u><i>Sensitivity</i></u>		<u><i>Threat</i></u>	
	Mean	Variance	Mean	Variance
<b>Immediate Supervision (IS)</b>				
My supervision violated some organizational policies.	5.33	2.74	5.43	3.28
My supervisor violated some organizational procedures.	5.03	2.83	5.20	3.26
I was treated unfairly by my supervisor.	4.55	3.45	4.65	3.63
My supervisor applied the organization's policies, rules, and regulations to employees inconsistently.	3.82	2.97	4.17	3.35
My supervisor showed favoritism toward some employees.	4.35	2.92	4.63	3.85
My supervisor had unfair expectations of me.	3.60	2.87	3.80	3.47
I was unable to approach my supervisor with ideas.	3.58	3.41	3.53	2.93
I was unable to approach my supervisor with concerns.	3.77	3.32	3.74	3.40
I would not come back to work for this organization if I had to work for the same supervisor.	4.21	3.62	4.46	3.97
My supervisor was an ineffective communicator.	3.47	2.74	4.10	3.43
My supervisor did not clearly explain the duties and responsibilities of my job to me.	3.10	2.80	3.45	2.89
My supervisor failed to keep me informed of matters important to my work.	3.55	3.21	3.73	3.40
My supervisor did not promote good communication my work group.	3.54	2.61	3.64	2.95
My supervisor did not allow me enough freedom to do my job.	3.06	2.61	3.08	2.97
My supervisor frequently managed me through pressure and fear.	4.57	3.84	4.81	3.60
My supervisor was not able to motivate me.	3.51	2.39	3.44	3.28
Morale in my workgroup was low.	3.46	2.75	3.09	2.74
My supervisor failed to develop cooperation among the employees in my work group.	3.76	2.86	3.76	3.32
My supervisor did not allow any of my coworkers enough freedom to do their jobs.	3.53	2.25	3.45	3.18
<b>Training and Development Opportunities (TD)</b>				
The training in this organization was poor.	3.71	3.13	3.88	3.09
The training opportunities in this organization were inadequate.	3.26	2.74	3.12	2.93
I was not provided with enough opportunities to improve my job knowledge and skills.	2.95	2.47	2.92	2.52
I did not receive adequate instruction on how to perform my job duties.	3.02	2.25	3.19	2.54
I did not know how or where to get the information I needed to succeed in my job.	3.22	2.47	3.26	2.70
None of employees of this organization were provided with enough opportunities to improve their job knowledge and skills.	3.47	2.44	3.56	2.97

**Company Leadership (CL)**

The leadership of this organization is not trustworthy.	5.59	2.98	5.65	3.25
The leadership of this organization failed to establish fair policies.	4.45	3.26	4.73	3.32
Bad organizational policies played a major role in my decision to leave this organization.	4.16	3.44	4.28	3.66
Overall, I was treated unfairly by senior management.	4.40	3.57	4.75	4.23
The leadership of this organization was not willing to accept input from me.	3.56	2.73	3.91	3.19
Senior management at this organization was not willing to make changes when needed.	4.25	3.06	4.67	3.58
Senior management at this organization never followed through on employee suggestions.	3.84	3.28	4.12	3.84
Senior management at this organization did not care about me.	3.55	3.89	3.85	4.31
Senior leadership did not provide the organization with a clear sense of direction.	3.95	4.04	4.07	3.53
Senior leadership at this organization did not communicate effectively with the employees.	3.80	3.06	3.91	3.67
My coworkers believe the leadership of this organization is not trustworthy.	4.74	3.72	4.70	4.07

**Advancement Opportunities (AO)**

There were insufficient promotional opportunities for me within this organization.	2.86	3.17	2.80	3.20
My supervisor was not interested in promoting my career.	4.17	3.52	4.16	3.45
My supervisor did not give me tasks that would help me develop in my job.	3.16	2.37	3.17	2.64
My supervisor did not give me opportunities for increased levels of responsibility.	3.23	2.64	3.16	2.80
There were insufficient challenges available for me within this organization.	2.62	2.24	2.61	2.42
I feel like I was placed into a dead-end career path.	3.48	3.53	3.66	3.30
Promotions in this organization seemed to go to only a specific clique of people.	4.39	3.24	4.39	3.97
People like me have very little opportunity for promotion.	3.76	3.30	3.56	3.79
There were insufficient promotional opportunities for all the employees within this organization.	3.38	2.83	3.22	3.11

**Performance Evaluation and Feedback (PE)**

The performance evaluation used by this organization was unfair.	3.66	2.89	3.64	3.42
I was never provided with a clear understanding of what was expected of me.	3.37	2.28	3.41	3.02
I did not receive timely feedback regarding my work performance.	3.41	2.72	3.33	3.06
I did not receive useful feedback regarding my work performance.	3.46	2.51	3.37	2.73
My supervisor did a poor job in explaining my performance evaluations to me.	3.88	3.08	4.06	3.47

My supervisor failed to identify weaknesses in my job performance.	3.42	2.55	3.51	2.52
My supervisor did not provide guidance for improvement in my job performance.	3.29	2.45	3.58	2.49
My work efforts were not given appropriate recognition.	3.58	3.32	3.74	3.36
My supervisor was unaware of my accomplishments.	3.57	3.39	3.42	3.04
My ideas and suggestions were never used on my job.	3.42	2.45	3.42	2.31
When my suggestions were not implemented, I was never told why they were not.	3.46	2.54	3.34	2.96
My performance evaluations were not a true representation of my job performance.	4.01	2.98	3.85	2.86
The work efforts of most of the organization's employees were not given appropriate recognition.	3.60	3.07	3.44	3.05
<b>Compensation and Benefits Package (CB)</b>				
I believe the salary paid to me was too low.	3.21	3.33	2.98	3.16
The salary I received was unfair considering my job skills.	3.83	3.18	3.59	3.02
This organization did not set appropriate salary levels for the jobs in the organization.	3.43	2.94	3.53	3.48
The salary paid to me by this organization was much lower than the salaries offered by other companies in the area or industry.	3.06	3.10	3.00	2.96
Salary played a major role in my decision to leave this organization.	2.85	3.21	2.70	3.16
This organization did not offer a good benefits package.	2.49	2.30	2.36	2.58
This organization did not offer its employees adequate medical insurance.	2.40	1.96	2.27	1.98
The number of paid vacation days offered by this organization was much lower than the number of days offered by other companies in the area or industry.	2.66	3.43	2.44	3.05
This organization did not offer its employees holiday pay (i.e., holidays off with pay or extra money for holidays worked).	2.32	2.79	2.20	2.47
This organization did not offer its employees a stock purchase plan.	2.00	2.07	1.76	1.25
This organization did not offer family friendly benefits, such as on-site child-care facilities or flexible work schedules.	2.45	3.09	2.35	2.41
The retirement (pension) plan offered to the employees of this organization was inadequate.	2.45	2.32	2.22	1.99
This organization refused to contribute to its employees' 401(k) savings plans (i.e., the organization would not match employees' contributions to the plan).	2.45	2.67	2.37	2.68
The employees of this organization feel their salaries are unfair.	3.55	3.04	3.63	3.10
The employees of this organization believe the salaries paid to them are too low.	3.18	3.24	3.10	3.54
<b>The Work Itself (WI)</b>				
My job was too easy for me.	2.37	1.97	2.35	2.27
My job was too difficult for me.	3.40	4.14	3.56	4.29
My job did not have enough task variety.	2.24	1.78	2.18	1.83

My job was boring.	2.60	2.52	2.72	2.99
My job did not allow me to utilize my skills and talents.	2.92	2.77	2.73	2.75
I was required to complete a lot of unnecessary paperwork on my job.	2.61	2.31	2.62	2.63
My assigned workload was overbearing.	3.40	2.53	3.68	2.78
Overall, the amount of work assigned to me was uneven most of the time (i.e., either too heavy or too light).	2.70	2.59	2.72	2.60
My job did not provide me with a feeling of satisfaction.	2.85	2.73	2.63	2.61
Many aspects of my job caused me great stress and frustration.	3.63	3.03	3.62	3.17
I felt like I was burning out on my job.	3.38	3.72	2.96	3.16
This organization did not provide me with the materials and resources necessary to do my job.	3.13	2.44	3.29	2.90
<b>Work Environment/Atmosphere (WE)</b>				
In general, the working conditions at this organization were poor.	3.77	2.96	4.04	4.51
My job frequently exposed me to unsafe working conditions.	4.08	4.09	4.15	4.73
My job frequently exposed me to uncomfortable working conditions.	3.83	3.28	3.81	3.66
My job required too much travel.	2.12	2.11	2.00	1.70
My job did not provide me with an opportunity to travel.	2.00	1.87	1.90	1.54
I was not provided with an opportunity to choose the geographic location of my job.	2.34	2.25	2.20	2.12
It was impossible to maintain a good work/life balance at this organization.	3.44	3.20	3.42	2.98
This organization employs far too many women.	5.09	4.57	4.78	4.39
This organization employs far too many homosexuals.	5.59	4.52	5.31	5.16
This organization employs far too many people with disabilities.	5.18	4.44	4.72	5.30
This organization employs far too many people with AIDS/HIV.	5.61	4.38	5.38	4.65
This organization employs far too many minorities.	5.62	4.55	5.03	5.28
<b>Handling of Complaints/Grievances (CG)</b>				
My complaints were rarely resolved in a timely manner.	3.52	3.09	3.69	3.44
This organization did not have an adequate grievance policy.	3.05	2.91	3.09	2.87
I could not voice my concerns or opinions without fear of retribution.	4.64	3.70	4.49	4.12
None of the employees felt they could voice concerns or opinions without fear of retribution.	4.63	3.21	4.45	3.48
<b>Discriminatory Practices (DP)</b>				
When making personnel decisions, this organization discriminated on the basis of gender, age, race, religion, or national origin.	5.36	4.44	5.47	4.23
I was sexually harassed.	5.84	3.81	5.33	4.55
I know of other employees who were sexually harassed.	5.49	4.12	5.14	4.59
This organization did not have a good sexual harassment plan.	4.13	4.06	3.78	3.73

This organization's sexual harassment policy was not communicated to all employees.	3.79	4.21	3.47	3.91
<b>Recruitment, Selection, Placement, Orientation, and Socialization Procedures (RS)</b>				
The expectations created during my hiring failed to match the reality of my job.	3.06	2.82	3.04	2.82
Information I received when hired did not allow me to make a valid assessment of this organization.	3.12	2.84	3.24	3.39
This organization did not adequately assess my knowledge, skills, and abilities when I was hired.	2.98	2.02	3.04	2.78
I was placed in a position that did not match my talents, skills, and abilities.	2.61	2.20	2.74	2.52
My supervisor made little effort in helping me adjust to my workplace.	3.46	2.94	3.64	2.92
Overall, I felt like I was an outsider to this organization.	3.55	2.81	3.51	3.10
Overall, I did not feel like a valued member of my workgroup.	3.53	2.76	3.31	2.79
Changes in my job were not adequately communicated to me.	3.44	2.66	3.25	2.70
<b>Interpersonal Relationships with Coworkers and Supervisor (IR)</b>				
I disliked working with my supervisor.	4.32	3.12	4.77	3.54
My supervisor did not care about me.	3.98	3.40	4.16	3.90
My supervisor never adequately resolved my complaints.	3.79	2.43	4.00	2.79
I did not enjoy working with my coworkers.	3.98	3.93	3.85	4.09
The senior management at this organization did not care about me.	3.66	3.64	3.97	3.72
Most of my coworkers disliked working with my supervisor.	4.33	3.58	4.08	3.71
<b>Overall Impression of Organization (OI)</b>				
This organization has a poor reputation.	3.87	4.37	4.38	4.49
I would not come back to work for this organization.	4.03	4.18	4.65	4.32
I would not recommend this organization as a good place to work.	4.64	4.14	5.29	3.86
My coworkers would not come back to work for this organization.	3.91	3.50	4.14	4.26
My coworkers would not recommend this organization as a good place to work.	3.98	3.39	3.99	3.45
<b>Comparison of Old Job to New Job (CJ)</b>				
The salary offered by my new employer is fairer than the salary I earned at this organization.	3.28	3.30	2.94	3.39
The salary offered by my new employer is higher than the salary I earned at this organization.	3.12	3.63	2.63	3.42
The benefits offered by my new employer are better than the benefits in this organization.	2.87	3.03	2.56	2.57
The duties I will perform at my new job are more appealing than the duties I performed at this organization.	3.12	3.50	2.67	2.81
My new employer offers more promotional opportunities than this organization offered.	2.94	3.10	2.69	2.72
My new employer offers better training than this organization had.	2.85	2.72	2.62	2.56

The working conditions at my new job are better than the working conditions I had in this organization.	3.29	3.64	3.24	3.36
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*Note.* *n* ranged from 86 to 94. All statements were measured on a 7-point continuum.

Participants were asked to rate each of the 132 statements for perceived degree of sensitivity and perceived degree of threat. The first scale, Perceived Degree of Sensitivity, measured the participants' perceptions of the degree of sensitivity associated with the statement (1 = *Non-sensitive*; 4 = *Moderately Sensitive*; and 7 = *Highly Sensitive*). The second scale, Perceived Degree of Threat, measured the participants' perceptions of the degree of threat associated with disclosing the information contained in the statement (1 = *Non-threatening*; 4 = *Moderately Threatening*; and 7 = *Highly Threatening*). The participants were asked to consider the following definitions when assigning their ratings:

*Non-sensitive*

When the information being disclosed is common knowledge and well known within the general population or does not require additional tact or caution when discussing

*Highly Sensitive*

When the information being disclosed is confidential or private in nature or requires a substantial amount of tact or caution when discussing

*Non-threatening*

When disclosure of the information does not result in injury or harm to the departing employee

*Highly Threatening*

When disclosure of the information can be harmful or injurious to the departing employee

**Results**

The data analyses sought to accomplish two goals. First, to create a scale of information type that could be used to identify which exit interview topics were likely to be perceived as non-sensitive or non-threatening, versus which topics were likely to be perceived as highly sensitive or highly threatening. This was accomplished by computing descriptive statistics for each of the items rated. Means and variances can be found in Table 2. Second, to identify which of the information type statements rated in Study 1 would be retained for use in Study 2. As Study 2 participants would have to rate each statement three times, once each for perceived sensitivity, perceived threat, and willingness to disclose, it was thought that using all 132 items would produce respondent boredom, fatigue, or apathy. Data reduction via factor analysis was not a suitable approach as the factor solution would have been under determined. Therefore, objective decision rules were applied, and a multi-step process was followed.

In Step 1 the mean for each item within a workplace dimension was examined and items were selected from within that dimension so that the retained items represented as much of the full range of scalar values as possible. In instances where two or more items had similar means Step 2 was utilized. In this step, the items' variances were examined and the item with the smallest amount of within-item variance was retained, while the other items were eliminated. This ensured that items most likely to result in the highest level of agreement among participants were retained over items that were less likely to result in agreement. Steps 1 and 2 were repeated for each of the 14 workplace dimensions. In Step 3, the means and variances for all of the items marked for retention, across workplace dimensions, were evaluated to ensure that, as a whole, these items represented as much of the full range of values as possible. This resulted in decreasing the item pool from 132 to 71 statements.

Since 71 statements was still too many to include in Study 2, subjective decision rules were applied to further decrease the item pool. This time, the content of the statements became the primary focus. The first step was to eliminate all items under the workplace dimension Comparison of Old Job to New

Job because participants in Study 2 would not be leaving the organization to accept employment elsewhere. Next, all statements concerned with the perception or treatment of others were dropped. The basis for this decision was the belief that perceptions of individual sensitivity or threat would have more impact on willingness to disclose than would the more general aspects of organizational life. Finally, the relevance of each items' content with respect to the participants to be used in Study 2 was assessed. Because Study 2 was being conducted in a regional grocery store company, those items most relevant to grocery store employees were retained. For example, "My job did not require enough task variety" was retained over "I was required to complete a lot of unnecessary paperwork on my job". Applying the objective and subjective decision rules decreased the item pool to 40 statements.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of Study 1 was to create a scale of information type along the dimensions of perceived sensitivity and perceived threat. An examination of Table 2 reveals that the participants in Study 1 did distinguish among various types of information with regard to degree of sensitivity and degree of threat. The means for perceived sensitivity ranged from 2.00 to 5.84. In general, items such as "My job did not have enough task variety" ( $M = 2.24$ ) were considered to be less sensitive; whereas, statements such as "I was sexually harassed" ( $M = 5.84$ ) or "This organization employs far too many homosexuals" ( $M = 5.59$ ) were perceived as being more sensitive.

The means for perceived threat ranged from 1.76 to 5.65. Once again, statements such as "The retirement (pension) plan offered to the employees of this organization was inadequate" ( $M = 2.22$ ) or "My job did not provide me an opportunity to travel" ( $M = 1.90$ ) were perceived as being less threatening. Conversely, items such as "The leadership of this organization is not trustworthy" ( $M = 5.65$ ) or "My supervisor violated some organizational policies" ( $M = 5.43$ ) were considered more threatening. Therefore, participants would be more likely to fear the ramifications of disclosure. The results suggest that participants perceived impersonal job conditions, such as the compensation package and the work environment, as less sensitive and less threatening than interpersonal issues involving interactions with others.

While there were several interesting findings in Study 1, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations. First, this study did not use employees who were leaving an organization. A more realistic study would have administered the questionnaire to employees who were quitting a job. The use of this participant group also impacted the study's external validity. It is not possible to ascertain whether these findings would occur in another setting or with a different group of participants.

## **STUDY 2: HYPOTHESIS TESTING**

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

The study was conducted at a regional grocery store and 150 employees from two of the organization's stores were invited to participate in the study. The stores to be surveyed were selected by the organization's Human Resource Department. The organization was concerned about turnover rates. One store was intentionally selected because it had a high turnover rate. In contrast, the other store chosen had a lower rate of turnover.

The research team distributed 144 surveys and 133 were completed and returned, for a response rate of 92.3%. The sample was 58.6% male and the average age was 35.65 ( $SD = 12.88$ ) years. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (86%). See Table 1 for additional demographic data.

#### *Procedure*

Data for this study were collected using questionnaires. They were distributed by the research team during regularly scheduled work hours. Each store's management team was responsible for randomly selecting the employees who would be asked to participate in the study.

## Measures

### *Demographics*

The questionnaire asked first for demographic information including gender, age, race, work experience, employment status (full-time or part-time), organizational tenure, job tenure, supervisory responsibilities, and pay classification. Then the participants read a series of statements that reflected possible reasons for voluntarily terminating an employment relationship and rated these statements for perceived degree of sensitivity, perceived degree of threat, and willingness to disclose. Finally the participants were asked whether any of their coworkers had quit their jobs for reasons that they were not comfortable talking to management about and, if so, to describe those reasons.

### *Information Type*

Participants in Study 2 responded to the 40 items that were retained from Study 1 by rating each of them for perceived degree of sensitivity and perceived degree of threat. The participants were asked to use 7-point Likert-type scales and to consider the definitions used in Study 1 when making these ratings.

### *Willingness to Disclose*

In addition to rating each of the 40 statements for perceived degree of sensitivity and perceived degree of threat, participants rated the items for willingness to disclose. They were asked to pretend that they had decided to leave the organization for the reasons mentioned in the statements and to use a 7-point rating scale (1 = This information is likely to be shared; 4 = Undecided if this information would be shared or withheld; and 7 = This information is likely to be withheld) to indicate the likelihood that they would share the information with the organization during an exit interview. The participants were asked to consider the following definitions when assigning their ratings:

### *Shared Information*

In all likelihood you would be comfortable, or willing, to provide the information requested

### *Withheld Information*

In all likelihood you would be uncomfortable, or unwilling, to provide the information requested

## Results

### *Factor Analysis*

Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was used to verify dimensionality of the 40 information type items. As each information type statement was rated three times, once each for perceived sensitivity, perceived threat, and willingness to disclose, three separate factor analyses were conducted. Identifying and interpreting the underlying dimensions of the data allows it to be summarized into a smaller set of composite factors with a minimal loss of information (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995).

Scree plots were examined to determine the optimal number of factors to retain. For each of the perceived sensitivity data, the perceived threat data, and the willingness to disclose data, three factors were found. However, two, three, four, and five factor solutions were tested for the data matrices representing perceived sensitivity, perceived threat, and willingness to disclose and in all three instances, a two-factor solution provided the clearest interpretation for all variables.

Items were retained that had factor loadings greater than or equal to  $\pm .50$ , without significant cross loadings (Hair et al., 1995). Statements that either had factor loadings less than  $\pm .50$  or that loaded onto more than one factor were not retained.

The factor loadings and percentage of variance accounted for by the rotated factor solutions for perceived sensitivity (PS), perceived threat (PT), and willingness to disclose (WD) data are presented in Table 3. In each case, the items loaded on two factors, one of which appeared to measure the overall

atmosphere or climate of the organization (Job Context – JC) and the other appeared to measure interactions or exchanges between individuals in the organization (Interpersonal Relations – IR).

Representative scores for each participant on the six factors (PSJC, PSIR, PTJC, PTIR, WDJC, WDIR) were derived by calculating a simple arithmetic mean of the participant’s scores for all items included in a given factor.

**TABLE 3**  
**VARIMAX ROTATED COMPONENT ANALYSIS FACTOR MATRIX FOR PERCEIVED SENSITIVITY, PERCEIVED THREAT, AND WILLINGNESS TO DISCLOSE (STUDY 2)**

	Information Type Items	<i>VARIMAX-rotated Loadings</i>					
		PSIR	PSJC	PTIR	PTJC	WDIR	WDJC
IS1	My supervisor broke some company policies and rules			.655			
CB1	The salary I received was unfair considering my job skills		.561		.610		.616
WI3	This company did not provide me with the materials and resources I needed to do my job		.564		.509		.612
CG1	My concerns were not resolved quickly enough		.633		.531		
CL3	The leadership of this company was not willing to accept input from me		.553				
IS2	I was treated unfairly by my supervisor	.623		.672		.668	
DP1	When making personnel decisions, this company discriminated on the basis of gender, age, race, religion or national origin	.638		.616		.563	
RS1	This company did not adequately assess my knowledge, skills, and abilities when I was hired		.540				
IR1	I disliked working with my supervisor	.751		.797		.735	
IS3	I was unable to approach my supervisor with concerns					.566	
TD3	I did not know how or where to get the information I needed to succeed in my job		.586				
AO2	There were not enough challenges available for me within this company		.660		.718		.737
CB2	Salary played a major role in my decision to leave this company		.632		.714		.708
OI1	I would not come back to work for this company	.602		.578		.538	
WI1	My job did not have enough task variety				.607		.687

CL2	The leadership of this company failed to establish fair policies		.522		.614
IS4	My supervisor was not an effective communicator	.607	.677		.681
OI2	I would not recommend this company as a good place to work	.667	.613		.688
WE2	This company employs far too many women	.564	.585		
RS2	I was placed in a position that did not match my talents, skills, and abilities			.506	.663
DP2	I was harassed	.668	.623		
TD2	I was not provided with enough opportunities to my job knowledge and skills		.671	.662	.598
CB3	This company did not offer its employees adequate medical insurance		.561	.534	.598
AO3	People like me have very little opportunity for promotion		.564	.604	
PE3	My performance evaluations were not a true representation of my job performance			.521	.555
IR2	My supervisor did not care about me		.628		.661
CG3	I could not voice concerns or opinions without fear of being punished	.641	.584		.573
CL1	The leadership of this company is not trustworthy	.717	.671		.699
RS3	Changes in my job were not adequately communicated to me		.591	.658	.637
DP3	I was intimidated	.747	.649		.594
CB4	The retirement (pension) plan offered to the employees of this company was inadequate			.540	.555
WE3	This company employs far too many minorities	.638	.534		.593
TD1	The training in this company was poor			.540	.536

*Note.* N = 133. Suppressed factor loading < .500. PSIR = Perceived Sensitivity: Interpersonal Relations; PSJC = Perceived Sensitivity: Job Context; PTIR = Perceived Threat: Interpersonal Relations; PTJC = Perceived Threat: Job Context; WDIR = Willingness to Disclose: Interpersonal Relations; WDJC = Willingness to Disclose: Job Context. Variance explained by PSJC = 20.68%, Variance explained by PSIR = 20.46%, Cumulative variance explained by PSJC and PSIR = 41.14%; Variance explained by PTJC = 19.56%, Variance explained by PTIR = 19.11%, Cumulative variance explained by PTJC and PTIR = 38.67%; Variance explained by WDJC = 19.81%, Variance explained by WDIR = 18.67%, Cumulative variance explained by WDJC and WDIR = 38.48%

*Psychometric Analyses and Descriptives*

Table 4 presents the Cronbach’s alphas, means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for the measures used in Study 2. All measures demonstrated reliability with internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) values in excess of .80.

**TABLE 4**  
**CORRELATION MATRIX (STUDY 2)**

<i>Variable</i>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Alpha</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
1 WDJC	2.70	1.28	.88					
2 WDIR	3.70	1.50	.89	.47**				
3 PSJC	3.16	1.28	.87	.52**	.32**			
4 PSIR	3.93	1.59	.89	.14	.67**	.49**		
5 PTJC	2.99	1.15	.88	.69**	.38**	.78**	.33**	
6 PTIR	3.94	1.42	.90	.18*	.73**	.35**	.86**	.40**

*Note.* N = 133. All variables were measured on a 7-point continuum. WDJC = Willingness to Disclose: Job Context; WDIR = Willingness to Disclose: Interpersonal Relations; PSJC = Perceived Sensitivity: Job Context; PSIR = Perceived Sensitivity: Interpersonal Relations; PTJC = Perceived Threat: Job Context; PTIR = Perceived Threat: Interpersonal Relations.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$

An examination of the scale means presented in Table 4 reveal several interesting observations. First, the mean for PSJC was 3.16 (SD = 1.28), indicating that when the reason for leaving is related to the overall organizational climate or atmosphere, individuals will view this information as *slightly* sensitive. In comparison, the mean for PSIR was 3.93 (SD = 1.59), indicating that individuals perceive negative interactions with other organizational members to be *moderately* sensitive. A paired-sample *t* test revealed that the difference between the PSJC and the PSIR scale means ( $t(132) = -5.97, p < .001$ ) was statistically significant.

Second, the mean for PTJC was 2.99 (SD = 1.15), indicating that disclosure is believed to be *slightly* threatening for the departing employee when the reason for leaving is related to the organization’s climate, while the mean for PTIR was 3.94 (SD = 1.42) indicating that disclosure is considered to be *moderately* threatening for the departing employee when the reason is related to interpersonal relationships. Once again, a paired-sample *t* test was performed and revealed that the difference between the PTJC and the PTIR scale means ( $t(132) = 7.74, p < .001$ ) was statistically significant.

Lastly, the mean for WDJC was 2.70 (SD = 1.28), suggesting that information pertaining to the overall atmosphere or climate of the organization is more likely to be shared than withheld during the exit interview process. The mean for WDIR was 3.70 (SD = 1.50) indicating that the study participants were uncertain whether they would disclose information regarding interactions with others in the organization. A paired-sample *t* test was performed and revealed that the difference between the WDJC and the WDIR scale means ( $t(132) = 8.025, p < .001$ ) was statistically significant.

The bivariate correlations presented in Table 4 indicate that the dependent variable WDJC had a significant relationship with the dependent variable WDIR ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ) and with the following independent variables: PSJC ( $r = .52, p < .01$ ), PTJC ( $r = .69, p < .01$ ), and PTIR ( $r = .18, p < .05$ ). The dependent variable WDJC did not have a significant relationship with PSIR. These results seem to suggest that individuals’ willingness to discuss issues pertaining to the overall job context is related to the perceived: (a) sensitivity of organizational climate issues and (b) threat associated with discussing organizational climate issues. Conversely, a willingness to discuss job context issues does not appear to be related to the individuals’ perception of the sensitivity associated with discussing interpersonal issues.

Table 4 further indicates that the dependent variable WDIR was statistically significantly related to PSJC ( $r = .32, p < .01$ ), PSIR ( $r = .67, p < .01$ ), PTJC ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ), and PTIR ( $r = .73, p < .01$ ). A possible interpretation of these findings is that individuals’ willingness to discuss issues related to

interpersonal exchanges with others in the organization appears to be dependent upon the perceived sensitivity and threat of interpersonal relations issues, as well as the perceived sensitivity and threat of organizational climate issues.

#### Regression Analysis

Preliminary analyses revealed that none of the demographic control variables measured in the questionnaire had a statistically significant effect on the measures used in this study. Therefore, they were not included as controls in the regression equations used to test our hypotheses.

Table 5 includes the results of the regression analyses that included PSIR, PSJC, PTIR, and PTJC as predictor variables. PSIR was a statistically significant predictor for WDIR ( $b = .629$ ,  $\beta = .667$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not for WDJC ( $b = -.117$ ,  $\beta = -.147$ , *ns*). Likewise, PSJC was statistically significant for WDJC ( $b = .595$ ,  $\beta = .596$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not for WDIR ( $b = .001$ ,  $\beta = .001$ , *ns*).

**TABLE 5**  
**SUMMARY OF SIMULTANEOUS REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR DIRECT EFFECT OF PERCEIVED SENSITIVITY ON WILLINGNESS TO DISCLOSE**

Independent Variables Entered	B	SE B	β	R <sup>2</sup>
Dependent variable: Willingness to Disclose: Interpersonal Relations				
				.446***
PSIR	.629	.070	.667***	
PSJC	.001	.088	.001	
F (2, 130) = 52.29, $p < .001$				
Dependent variable: Willingness to Disclose: Job Context				
				.292***
PSIR	-.117	.068	-.147	
PSJC	.595	.084	.596***	
F (2, 130) = 26.75, $p < .001$				

*Note.* N = 133. PSIR = Perceived Sensitivity: Interpersonal Relations; PSJC = Perceived Sensitivity: Job Context.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

As can be seen in Table 6, the same pattern was also noted for the regression equations that examined the effect of perceived threat on willingness to disclose. In these equations, PTIR was significantly related to WDIR ( $b = .725$ ,  $\beta = .685$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not to WDJC ( $b = -.102$ ,  $\beta = -.113$ , *ns*). PTJC was a statistically significant predictor of WDJC ( $b = .814$ ,  $\beta = .735$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not of WDIR ( $b = .137$ ,  $\beta = .105$ , *ns*).

Based on these relationships, the final regression equations used to test the hypotheses were constructed as follows: The equation with WDIR as the dependent variable included PSIR (PTIR) as a predictor variable, but not PSJC (PTJC). Conversely, when WDJC was the dependent variable of interest, only PSJC (PTJC) was included in the regression equation.

**TABLE 6**  
**SUMMARY OF SIMULTANEOUS REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR DIRECT EFFECT OF PERCEIVED THREAT ON WILLINGNESS TO DISCLOSE**

Independent Variables Entered	B	SE B	β	R <sup>2</sup>
Dependent variable: Willingness to Disclose: Interpersonal Relations				
				.539***
PTIR	.725	.069	.685***	
PTJC	.137	.085	.105	
F (2, 130) = 75.92, <i>p</i> < .001				
Dependent variable: Willingness to Disclose: Job Context				
				.486***
PTIR	-.102	.062	-.113	
PTJC	.814	.076	.735***	
F (2, 130) = 61.40, <i>p</i> < .001				

*Note.* N = 133. PTIR = Perceived Threat: Interpersonal Relations; PTJC = Perceived Threat: Job Context.  
 \* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .01. \*\*\* *p* < .001.

Hypothesis 1 predicted a direct effect of perceived sensitivity on willingness to disclose. Specifically, it was posited that individuals would be more willing to disclose information when the exit interview topic is perceived as non-sensitive and more reluctant to disclose when the topic is perceived as highly sensitive. Table 7 reveals that when WDIR was regressed onto PSIR, the regression coefficient for PSIR was statistically significant ( $b = .629$ ,  $\beta = .668$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, it can be concluded that PSIR did have a direct effect on WDIR. Likewise, when WDJC was regressed onto PSJC, PSJC was statistically significant ( $b = .524$ ,  $\beta = .524$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, it can be concluded that Hypothesis 1 was supported. Individuals are more willing to discuss non-sensitive issues than highly sensitive issues.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a direct effect of perceived threat on willingness to disclose. When WDIR was regressed onto PTIR, the regression coefficient for PTIR was statistically significant ( $b = .770$ ,  $\beta = .728$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Table 8 also shows a statistically significant regression coefficient for PTJC ( $b = .764$ ,  $\beta = .689$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, it can be concluded that Hypothesis 2 was supported and that perceived threat has a direct effect on willingness to disclose. Individuals are more willing to disclose information regarding a specific exit interview topic when the disclosure is perceived as being non-threatening, but more reluctant to disclose when the disclosure is perceived as being more threatening.

**TABLE 7**  
**SUMMARY OF REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR DIRECT EFFECT OF PERCEIVED SENSITIVITY ON WILLINGNESS TO DISCLOSE**

Independent Variables Entered	B	SE B	β	R <sup>2</sup>
Dependent variable: Willingness to Disclose: Interpersonal Relations				
PSIR	.629	.061	.668***	.446***
F (1, 131) = 105.38, <i>p</i> < .001				
Dependent variable: Willingness to Disclose: Job Context				
PSJC	.524	.074	.524***	.275***
F (1, 131) = 49.70, <i>p</i> < .001				
<i>Note.</i> N = 133. PSIR = Perceived Sensitivity: Interpersonal Relations; PSJC = Perceived Sensitivity: Job Context. * <i>p</i> < .05. ** <i>p</i> < .01. *** <i>p</i> < .001.				

**TABLE 8**  
**SUMMARY OF REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR DIRECT EFFECT OF PERCEIVED THREAT ON WILLINGNESS TO DISCLOSE**

Independent Variables Entered	B	SE B	β	R <sup>2</sup>
Dependent variable: Willingness to Disclose: Interpersonal Relations				
PTIR	.770	.063	.728***	.529***
F (1, 131) = 147.41, <i>p</i> < .001				
Dependent variable: Willingness to Disclose: Job Context				
PTJC	.764	.070	.689***	.475***
F (1, 131) = 118.56, <i>p</i> < .001				
<i>Note.</i> N = 133. PTIR = Perceived Threat: Interpersonal Relations; PTJC = Perceived Threat: Job Context. * <i>p</i> < .05. ** <i>p</i> < .01. *** <i>p</i> < .001.				

### Discussion

The purpose of Study 2 was to determine whether information that is perceived as highly sensitive or highly threatening was more likely to be withheld from the organization during the exit interview process. Factor analysis resulted in identification of two factors: Interpersonal Relations (e.g., PSIR, PTIR, WDIR) and Job Context (e.g., PSJC, PTJC, WDJC).

Analysis of the means for each dimension made it clear that interpersonal reasons for leaving are deemed more sensitive than reasons related to the job context. Likewise, participants felt that discussing interpersonal reasons for leaving was more threatening for departing employees than discussing job context reasons for leaving. Finally, the average participant indicated being more willing to discuss job context (M = 2.70) than interpersonal relations issues (M = 3.70) in their exit interviews. Thus, the conclusion that seems warranted is that individuals will be more willing to disclose information when the exit interview topic concerns the context rather than the interpersonal aspects of the job.

Regression results suggest that perceived sensitivity and perceived threat are statistically significant predictors of individuals' willingness to disclose. Specifically, WDIR was significantly related to both PSIR and PTIR. Therefore, individuals' willingness to discuss issues related to interpersonal exchanges with others in the organization appears to be dependent upon the perceived sensitivity of interpersonal issues and the perceived threat associated with discussing interpersonal issues. Individuals' willingness to discuss organizational climate issues is related to the perceived sensitivity and the perceived threat associated with those issues.

Although Study 2 produced several important findings, it is not without limitations. This study asked employees for their hypothetical response, as they were not actually leaving the organization. Additionally, given that each store's management team was responsible for selecting the employees who would be asked to participate, participant selection may not have been completely random. However, it is unlikely that the stores' management teams had the ability to bias the results by choosing only favored employees because the managers were limited to those employees who were working at the time the survey was being administered.

Another limitation was the length and complexity of the questionnaire. The participants were required to rate each of the 40 statements contained in Part 2 three times, once each for perceived degree of sensitivity, perceived degree of threat, and willingness to disclose. This may have resulted in respondent fatigue or apathy. The questionnaire was complex because it required the participants to use a response format that was unfamiliar to them. To address these concerns, the researchers provided the participants with explicit instructions for completing the survey, walked them through sample ratings, and were onsite to answer questions. Given the strong reliabilities of the measures used, these strategies were apparently effective in overcoming the difficulties associated with the questionnaire's length and complexity.

## **CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

### **Conclusions**

This research had several major findings. First, the participants in both Study 1 and Study 2 did distinguish among types of information with regard to degree of sensitivity and degree of threat. The findings from both studies suggest that participants perceived impersonal job conditions, such as salary and benefits, to be less sensitive and less threatening than interpersonal issues involving interactions with others. When the purported reason for leaving was related to organizational context factors as opposed to interpersonal factors, the participants either did not perceive the reason to be as personal or confidential in nature or did not feel as much tact or caution was necessary when discussing the information. Participants did not expect disclosure to result in as much injury or harm to the departing employee.

The second major finding was that Study 2 participants' perceptions of sensitivity and threat did impact their willingness to disclose during the exit interview process. The average participant in this study indicated a greater willingness to discuss non-sensitive or non-threatening topics, such as job context issues. Conversely, these participants indicated a greater reluctance to discuss highly sensitive or highly threatening topics, such as interpersonal issues.

The findings above are consistent with the results from other research studies. Past research has indicated that departing employees are less likely to discuss personal (Giacalone & Knouse, 1989) or confidential (Giacalone et al., 1997) information, or topics that may get them into trouble (Feldman & Klaas, 1999; Giacalone et al., 1997). Therefore, departing employees have been more likely to discuss salary and benefits (Giacalone & Knouse, 1989; Giacalone et al., 1997; Zarandona & Camuso, 1985) and training opportunities (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1991) than personality conflicts (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1991), personal problems (Giacalone & Knouse, 1989), or satisfaction with leadership (Giacalone et al., 1995).

## Organizational Implications

One of the underlying reasons for conducting this research was the assumption that exit interviews must get beneath the surface and uncover the real causes of voluntary turnover. Only when this occurs will the organization be able to improve its retention rate and enhance its overall functioning.

Based on the results from this research, the following suggestions are being offered as strategies for obtaining reliable and valid information. Recognizing that employees do distinguish between types of information with regard to degree of sensitivity and degree of threat, the first step the organization must take is to identify those topics that are most prone to distortion. Perhaps it is most helpful to think of information type as an iceberg, where safe to disclose information is the visible tip of the iceberg and risky to disclose information is the portion of the iceberg that lurks beneath the surface. Effective organizational functioning depends on identifying the types of information that lie below the waterline, because it is this information that can potentially sink the company ship.

The organization should also train its exit interviewers to ensure that accurate and complete information is obtained. This training may include topics such as how to (a) develop and maintain rapport, (b) identify the appropriate types of information to seek, (c) use probes and follow-up questions, (d) recognize when distortion is occurring, (e) remain neutral, and (f) take notes. Training exit interviewers in each of these areas should help the organization ensure that accurate and complete information is obtained.

Given the lack of empirical studies looking at exit interview disclosure, it is important to note that the recommendations discussed above are tentative. Additional studies are necessary before further recommendations can be made.

## Future Research

As there have been very few scientific inquiries looking at the reasons for exit interview response distortion, the possibilities for future research are numerous. One such possibility is undertaking additional research to further refine the information type scale. Additional data should be collected and factor-analyzed to verify that 2-factor solutions continue to provide the clearest interpretation for the perceived sensitivity data, the perceived threat data, and the willingness to disclose data. Future research should test for the existence of direct, moderated, and mediated effects.

In addition, there is a need to replicate the findings of this research with additional samples, in different industries and geographical locations, and particularly with a sample of employees who were actually leaving the organization. Data from these departing employees could be collected either on the date they were leaving, a week later, or longer. With the questionnaire developed in this study for measuring sensitivity, threat, and willingness to disclose, this would seem to be the next important study to conduct.

Future research should examine the reasons for response distortion that are within the control of the organization. Departing employees might distort their reason for leaving as a result of many organizational factors including the communications climate (Gordon, 2011) and other aspects of their relationship with the organization and with the person conducting the exit interview. Further examining these factors would allow the development of recommendations for organizations that would mitigate exit interview response distortion.

Additionally, as most studies on exit interview response distortion have been quantitative in nature, understanding of this complex phenomenon would be greatly improved with qualitative methods. Thus, future research should employ qualitative techniques capable of gathering rich, descriptive data.

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