

BUSINESS 2.0

WHAT WORKS

Acing the Exit Interview

How to mine the data in your workers' heads before the best ideas walk out the door.

By Paul Kihla, [May 2004 Issue](#)

How's this for an eye-popping stat? About two-thirds of [Lockheed Martin's \(LMT\)](#) 130,000 employees are expected to quit within this decade. It's one more effect of the baby boom: 30 million of America's most experienced workers will soon be leaving the workforce -- and taking their institutional knowledge with them.

How to plug the brain drain? Knowledge-management consultants suggest a kind of Vulcan mind meld with anyone eyeing the door. "We want to know how someone came up with that multimillion-dollar product," says Larry Todd Wilson, who trains "knowledge harvesters" for Halliburton, a military and oil-services contractor.

Here's how to pick the brains of your best and brightest.

1. Pull It Away From HR

Nothing against those good folks, but you need a team of both IT and knowledge-[management](#) experts who understand the company's strategies and processes. [IBM \(IBM\)](#) was an early champion of this approach; its "human capital management" practice mines its own minds and, as a consultant, those in dozens of Fortune 500 companies.

2. Focus on the Creative Class

Not everyone in the company needs an exit interview. Target the gurus in a particular field, prolific inventors, or people in charge of a set of relationships either inside or outside the company. In particular, seize those who haven't groomed obvious successors. Halliburton's knowledge harvesters focused on a chemical division manager who had juggled suppliers and bundled contracts. He'd never shown anyone else his tricks of the trade.

3. Make the Information Accessible

In the past, companies have tried to disseminate worker expertise by archiving transcripts and case studies. But even when left on a company intranet, this material was neglected. Halliburton picks key lessons and designs online flowcharts that are so rich in graphics that viewing them is like playing a game of Chutes and Ladders. At Georgia-Pacific, a credit manager's knowledge was packaged as interactive [software](#) that guides debt collectors. Be creative when sharing the info wealth.

