I was recently asked by a professional publication to comment on the subject of exit interviews, as the below synopsis.

**Synopsis**
Many employers struggle to get to the bottom of why staff leave, due to a whole number of factors including a desire on the part of leaving staff to avoid burning any bridges in their exit interview. These overly-positive accounts from leavers means HR departments can struggle to stem the tide of departures, are endlessly in expensive, time-consuming recruitment cycles, and thus lose the expertise and continuity gained from long service. In light of this: how can managers find out the real reasons behind staff departures? How can exit interviews be designed to solicit honest, useful responses?

**Comment:**
There seems to be little relevant direct research on exit interviews *per se*, although there is some research in the area of ‘attrition’, such as using them as a method to discover reasons for early exits. This includes pieces on student nurses and health workers. These include C.Glossop (2002) Nurse Education Today, 22 (5) and A.Flint and J.Webster (2011) Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 1, Q.Utley-Smith et al (2006) Western Journal of Nursing Research, 28 (8).

Exit interviews need to be seen holistically and from both perspectives - organisational and individual - and not as just yet another box ticking exercise foisted on people by HR departments. If that is the case, then professional preparation, running and possible ‘results’ are needed. This can include interviews being seen as a process for organisations and managers to learn from and change situations. This is in terms of gleaning the (maybe different) opinions of departing staff (rather than just existing personnel) and reasons for leaving. Such useful information can be used to make improvements in all aspects of work, from processes and systems to management, resourcing and retention, rewards, development opportunities and culture.

For the conduct of exit interviews there are a range of practical issues to consider. These concern the: ‘what’ (to ask or not to ask), ‘who’ (ranging from line managers to external HR consultants), ‘where’ (on or off site) and ‘when’ (during, at the end or after leaving). Then there are the thorny issues of the ‘how’ (in person, by telephone/post/email) and ‘outcome’ (where logged, who is privy to them and how are results publicised)?

A major problem with exit interviews is that it is all too easy for both parties to have ‘knee jerk’ reactions and to take entrenched positions. There can be organisational insecurity and defensiveness, with management trying to avoid exposure to possible criticism as well maybe taking a ‘good riddance’ as ‘no-one is indispensable’ mentality. From the other side the individual may see the exit interview as a chance to have their (maybe previously ignored) say on concerns and make criticisms of people, processes and organisations. It is partly the atmosphere surrounding the departure which sets the tone for exit interviews. Of course, both
parties need to remember that not only can business be a ‘small world’, but that they may well cross, indirectly or even directly, paths again!

Likewise, there may be some influence on views about such exit interviews and their use by: organisational size (small versus large firms), sector (public versus private and within say finance) and strategy (ie skill base and labour turnover, say fast food retailing versus more knowledge-based businesses).

In more detail on size we can note that small firms may lack resources (or policies) and time (or anonymity) to commit to interviews yet the loss of a single person may well be critical. In contrast, large firms with these sorts of policies in place and resources to commit, but where the single person may be less critical.

In more detail on sector we can note the following. For instance, finance organisations may well have less interest (with their ‘macho’ culture of the organisations) in exit interviews versus public sector organisations. As such, exit interviews are set within the ethos of the overall corporate culture.

Finally, I was asked for Five Tips for Better Exit Interviews. As is common to many types of interview in HR processes:

1. Clarity of purpose and process
2. Preparation and convenience for both sides
3. Examples of useful outcomes/results from previous interviews
4. Acknowledgement of top management commitment
5. Use longitudinal follow-ups as work comparisons