

On- und Offboarding Part 2: **Offboarding: Last Impressions Last**

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As we saw in our [article concerning onboarding](#), a well-conceived onboarding process that focuses on the needs of new employees is a unique opportunity for employers to lay the foundations for a constructive and harmonious future. The same holds for offboarding or, put more diplomatically, employee-farewell processes.

As the saying goes, ‘the first impression counts, but the last impression lasts’. This is precisely why, in the context of a positive parting culture, employers must seize the chance to transform what may look like the end of a collaboration into a potential new beginning.

Offboarding – not the end of a story?

When employees decide to part ways in pursuit of a new challenge, they generally don’t just drop everything and disappear from one day to the next. From the time that notice is given, to the last day of work, and even beyond, various noteworthy dynamics arise.

Offboarding, refers to the professional farewell of employees in the context of the termination of an employment (for whatever reason). Such severance procedures are handled in very different ways. For some, this means well-structured administrative processes, for others it refers to more emotional dimensions of employee farewells. Others still, integrate these two aspects, keeping in touch with former employees well beyond their last day in the office.

In practice, the importance of offboarding is often underestimated to an even greater extent than its counterpart, onboarding – after all, why spend time and money on people with whom you will soon have nothing to do?

When employees bid a business farewell, they take with them their individual impressions of the corporate culture that they experienced. These insights are invaluable for any company that is serious about perpetually improving itself. Honest and open first-hand feedback is virtually priceless, and yet surprisingly, this valuable source of information is often foregone. Indeed, it is not even uncommon to encounter the opposite attitude: ‘if you are no longer with us, then you are against us and we are no longer interested in your input’.

[Jens Hollmann](#), organisational and leadership consultant and owner/founder of [proresults.eu](#), points out that “similar to onboarding, companies usually have well-defined and organised professional and administrative processes in place for when employees leave.” – relinquishing login access, handing over work materials, responsibilities, and activities to new or remaining team members, etc.

Openness towards employees who are leaving and towards using their knowledge and experience constructively, on the other hand, is still far too uncommon. And yet, this is exactly where valuable background information that is not so easily gleaned from an ongoing employment relationship is often brought to the fore, highlighting room for mutual improvement. “The fact that the insights gathered by both parties during an employee-employer relationship can act as fertile ground for ongoing business development once said relationship ends is something that companies are still coming to grips with”, says Jens.

Open to improvement:

People don’t generally enjoy it when their weaknesses are pointed out to them. Nevertheless, such criticisms ought to be made the most of, even if it is unpleasant. That is why we generally prefer to speak in terms of room for improvement than in terms of flaws. Some may see this as a purely semantic distinction – a mere word game. But words trigger emotions and it’s important to foster an environment that is as conducive to self-reflection and improvement as possible. As Martin Permantier says in his book on future-conscious leadership culture, [mindset matters!](#) Ultimately, we decide what mindset we take and whether we are going to devote attention to the motives and reasons that prompted an employee to leave.

As Jens points out, “it’s not a question of assigning blame, but one of establishing a true and honest feedback-culture – of having an honest and frank conversation about things that might otherwise fall by the wayside. It’s vital that businesses recognise this distinction between administrative offboarding, and cultural debriefing.”

There are two central questions that businesses should be placing at the core of their ‘farewell processes’: first, ‘would you recommend us to potential new employees?’ and second, ‘what could we have done to have kept you in our team?’. “From there, it’s just a question of digging deeper into the answers to these key questions”, says Jens.

Offboarding support:

[Good offboarding](#) is a conversation that occurs at eye level. Sincere criticisms are welcomed and taken on board by employers rather than justified or defended against. When one gives formal notice, the power-dynamic between employee and employer naturally shifts and certain inhibitions fall away – this is what makes offboarding such a unique opportunity to gather honest feedback.

Nevertheless, some barriers to full disclosure may remain. For example, not every outgoing employee will be comfortable with telling representatives of a business point blank that its managers leave something to be desired. However, if true, this is precisely the kind of information that business leaders need to hear. Being able to speak candidly is essential to a fruitful offboarding process, making experienced coaches an extremely valuable resource.

Just like in the case of effective onboarding, establishing clear boundaries between the responsibilities of HR departments (administrative offboarding) and the tasks best left to external coaches is key. While HR departments are well equipped for the administrative elements of offboarding, external coaches are uniquely placed to neutrally facilitate and mediate discussions between employers and outgoing employees. They bring a sense of impartiality to the table, they know how to establish a trustworthy foundation for honest feedback, and they are well versed in effectively communicating this feedback to relevant decision makers within a business.

As evidenced by the [ICF 2020 Global Coaching Study](#), industry leaders are starting to catch on to the benefits that such professionals offer. It found that the global coaching market grew by close to \$500 billion between 2015 and 2019, with the Western European market growing by \$18 million in the same period. But it shouldn't take fear of missing out (FOMO) for hold outs to realise that investing into dynamic and participative offboarding pays off.

Post-employment is pre-employment:

In sports it is often said that after the game is before the game, and the same applies here: post-employment *is* pre-employment. That is to say, when employees, especially highly skilled ones, leave a company, they don't disappear off the face of the earth. Instead, ex-employees re-join the pool of potential future hires, ideally finding their way back after a few years of gaining exciting and valuable experience somewhere else. There is a clear advantage to so-called 'boomerang-hiring' – everyone's cards are on the table and each party knows what they can and can't expect from the other.

Consider universities, for instance, where graduates are referred to as 'alumni' rather than 'ex-students'. In this way, they recognise and articulate the value that these individuals can still bring to the table in the future and they encourage them to remain engaged in the community well after graduation. This in turn leads not only to a vibrant and far-reaching network, but also to millions of dollars in donations to these institutions – a model that companies might also want to consider taking advantage of in terms of their employees.

As [cyberunity's KNOW YOUR TALENTS \(KYT\)](#) approach highlights, everyone benefits when employers take a vested interest in their future employees well *before* they are even hired. At the same time, such an interest in one's employees should never really end outright, not even when a long-time colleague decides to explore other exciting opportunities elsewhere. When relationships are maintained beyond employment, you may just be able to win back a familiar face with an extended skillset and fresh momentum a few years down the line. What better way to get a head start on recruiting than by maintaining ties with already trained and culturally integrated former employees?

As [Peter Kosel](#), founder of cyberunity AG, sums up, KNOW YOUR TALENTS is a mindset that never really ends. One of the best ways to remain engaged in the careers of promising individuals and to keep track of how they may add value to one's business in the future is to ensure that their farewell has been as amicable and constructive as possible."