

Exiting a job with grace, politeness

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Starting a new job is easy. You show up.

But leaving a job requires more thought and more risk.

It can be an experience fraught with misunderstanding and uncertainty, or it can be pleasant. You just won't know until you resign.

But before you tell your boss of your plans, there are things to think about. How much notice do you give? Do you write a letter of resignation? What kind of impression will you leave after you head out the door? And should you be prepared for your boss to escort you out that minute and ask you not to return?

The custom in most fields, but not all, is to give an employer two weeks notice before you leave.

The origin of two weeks notice is unclear, but experts think it has to do with the payroll cycle -- companies often pay workers every two weeks, so best for them to work through their final pay cycle.

You may give two weeks notice or one month notice but whatever the time period, "be upbeat, be helpful," says Barbara Pachter, a business etiquette expert and head of Pachter & Associates of Cherry Hill. "You need to help to make that transition as smooth as possible."

That means introducing your replacement to your co-workers, explaining your job to the new person and finishing everything that needs to be done. It means swallowing resentments and conducting yourself professionally.

"I think it's important for employers and employees to look out for each other's interests," says Edwin Hartman, professor of business ethics at New York University's Stern School of Business, "to try to accommodate each other."

New Jersey is an at-will state. That means employers can let workers go at any time for any reason, as long as it isn't an illegal reason. It also means employees can quit at any time, unless they are working under a contract that says otherwise.

So two weeks notice is a custom and it's polite, but it is not legally mandated.

However, if an employer asks a new employee to read and sign a company handbook and the handbook says an employee must give a certain amount of notice, then that's a contract and the employee must abide by it, says Christopher Heyer, who practices employment law in Wayne. A company, though, may choose not to hold an employee to the allotted time.

If you, the worker, give your two weeks notice and the company does not have a notice policy, your boss can ask you to stop work now, and that ends any obligation the company has to pay you, says Ty Hyderally, who practices employment law in Montclair.

That means you just lost two weeks salary.

It may get murky if your company asks you to help with the transition but scale back from your past workload. The company may not want to pay you a full salary for only 50 percent of the work. If that's the case, the company is responsible for spelling out how much work you do and how much you will get paid for that work, Hyderally says.

If not, the default is to pay your full wage.

Sometimes, a manager may tell human resources to end an employee's benefits immediately after the

employee has given notice. That is not legal.

"You have to continue the benefits until the person is no longer providing services for the company," Hyderally says.

Now, resignation letters.

A worker is not required by law to write a letter of resignation. But check the company handbook to see if it is company policy.

Companies may want a resignation letter because it spells out that the worker is voluntarily leaving, and when.

Since resignation letters are usually quite straightforward -- your name and your intention to stop work in two weeks -- they do not include any problems you may have with the company.

If you sue the company after you leave, the company can use the letter to show there were no problems, Hyderally says.

Another reason companies like resignation letters, according to Barbara Lee, professor of human resource management at Rutgers University's School of Management and Labor Relations: "From the company's perspective, they're very important because sometimes people change their minds" and want to come back to work. But if they've written a resignation letter and the company doesn't want them back, then that's it.

If you are disgruntled about your job, the place to vent is not in a resignation letter but in the exit interview, if there is one. And even then, Lee cautions, you should do so diplomatically.

"Don't put your grudges in writing because they have a way of getting around," Lee says. "It's important from an employee's perspective, even if they've had a negative experience at the company, to be as cooperative as they can as they head out the door."

Heyer says it's important you make sure you have returned all the company's belongings -- key cards, cell phones and identification tags. You don't want your old employers thinking you purposely stole from them.

You might also want to have an idea what kind of reference your old boss will give to prospective employers, Heyer says. By law, a company only has to say that you worked at the company, your dates of service and maybe your title. But of course, a glowing reference is what you would like.

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