

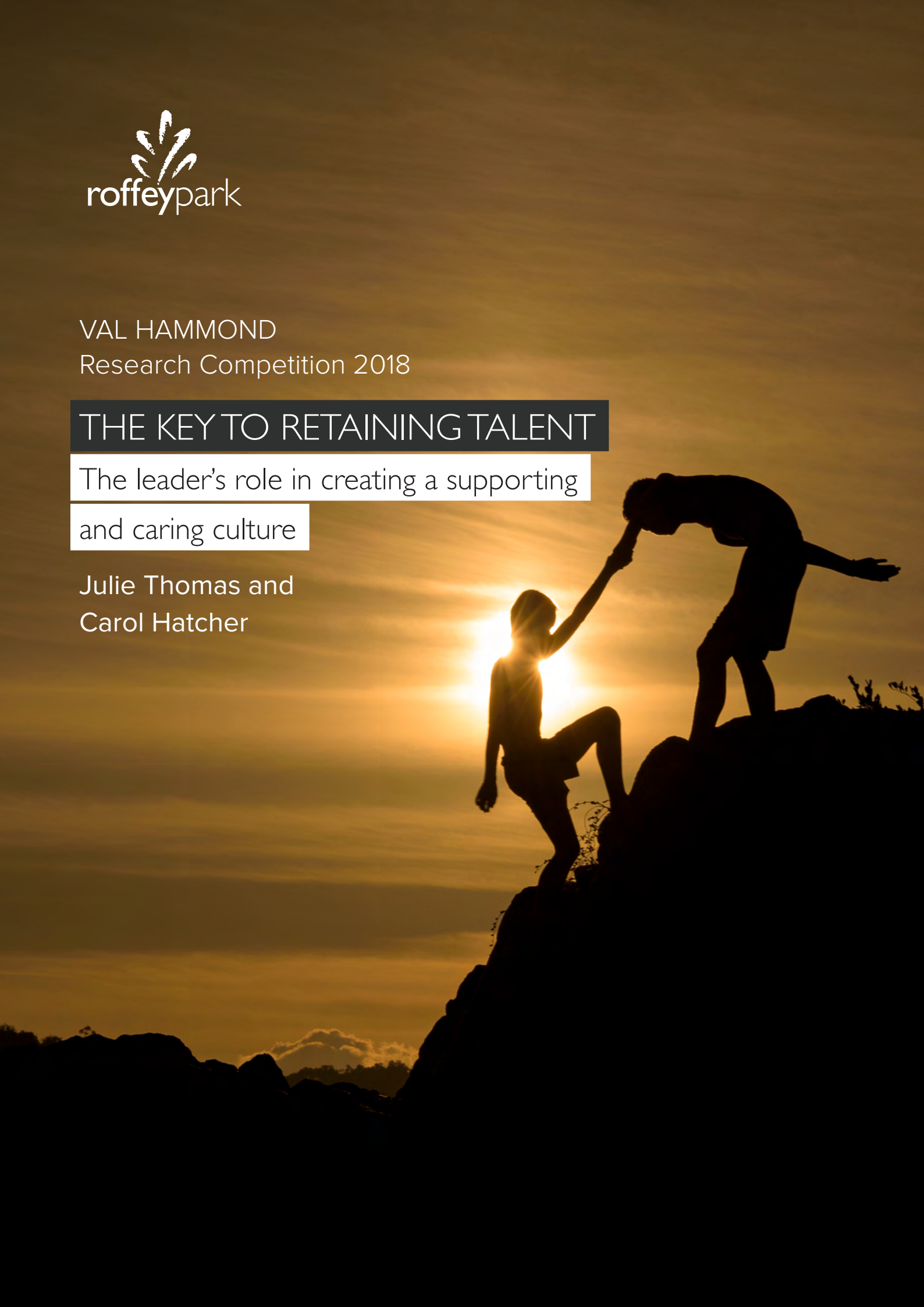


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THE KEY TO RETAINING TALENT

The leader's role in creating a supporting
and caring culture

Julie Thomas and
Carol Hatcher



The authors

Julie Thomas is a lecturer in Human Resource Management in Swansea Business School at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. She is a Chartered Member of the CIPD and has over 20 years' experience of working in the field of Human Resources in both the private and public sector. She gained a Master of Arts Degree in 2017, with her research on the Retention of Childcare Social Workers.

Carol Hatcher is a researcher at Roffey Park and has 10 years' experience in the field of applied research. She has worked with a wealth of different organisations and has a passion for exploring the richness and detail of data more deeply.

Introduction

If you are a manager struggling with retention in your organisation, you may be regarding Brexit with some trepidation. With the possibility of the end of free movement looming, it's anticipated that UK organisations will be suffering from shortages in both high and low-skilled workers.

In this research we explore the actions organisations may take to retain talent. We include a case study which examines how managers in a local authority, who set out to understand and address the reasons for high turnover and poor retention rates in their childcare social workers, found that the answers were well within their control.

In a wider organisational context, how much can a supportive and caring culture enhance the employee experience and influence retention? Could this make a real difference in your organisation's post-Brexit talent strategy?

Retention strategies

According to the CIPD¹ retention is "the extent to which an employer retains its employees". This is distinct from turnover which refers to "the proportion of employees who leave an organisation over a set period". Retention strategies "aim to ensure that key people stay with the organisation and that wasteful and expensive levels of employee turnover are reduced. They will be based on an analysis of why people stay and why they leave"². This last point is important. Organisations who focus on just one or the other may be missing something. Having regular conversations with employees will allow managers to assemble a more complete picture of why people leave the organisation, thus enabling a deeper understanding of how to build a rigorous talent strategy that's fit for purpose.



TIP: Exit interviews are not enough – talk to current employees to find out what is keeping them in the organisation and what may cause them to leave.

According to Stephen Taylor³, the major causes of turnover fall into 4 categories:

- 1  Pull factors – factors external to the organisation that attract employees away, whether they are satisfied with their job or not.
- 2  Push factors – factors internal to the organisation that cause an employee to look elsewhere.
- 3  Unavoidable turnover - which is often outside the control of the organisation, for example retirement.
- 4  Involuntary turnover - which is initiated by the organisation, for example redundancies.

Retention strategies should identify potential 'pull' factors and the root causes of dissatisfaction in terms of 'push' factors, whilst also ensuring recruitment strategies and workforce planning are effective – the latter will ensure the organisation has the right people in the right numbers joining in the first place.

Turnover can be further defined as 'controllable' and 'uncontrollable' and Taylor argues that an organisation has more control over turnover than it may at first appear. Literature in this area describes evidence-based strategies for turnover which span the following areas: recruitment, selection, socialisation, training and development, compensation and rewards, supervision and engagement. Some of these can be controlled at an organisation level, while others lie firmly in the hands of line managers. Taylor suggests that one way to reduce turnover is to give the responsibility for doing so to managers, thus increasing its profile. This all suggests that effective retention results from a combination of good organisational and HR practice and skilled and competent managers.



TIP: Line managers are key but may need incentives to focus on this issue. Consider making retention high profile - make it an agenda item on which managers regularly report.

We know from an extensive literature search that there are many theories as to why employees leave or stay. Yao et al (2004)⁴ for example, found that the level of job embeddedness - that is the extent to which employees feel 'stuck' in their job, through links (teams), fit (compatibility) and sacrifice (what they would have to give up if they left) - was an important retention factor. Turnover, however, can also be a result of a trigger such as being head-hunted or a shock such as divorce⁵ and therefore out of an organisation's control.

In terms of retention strategies, there is a common misconception about employee turnover that a simple 'one size fits all' retention strategy is the most effective. Allen et al⁶ argue that context-specific, evidence-based strategies are more effective (and this is certainly the approach advocated here in this paper). In other words every organisation should do its research and seek the views of its workforce before implementing any retention strategy, if it is to be successful.



TIP: What works for other organisations, may not work for you. Seek the views of your workforce before implementing a retention strategy and tailor it to your organisation.

A Case Study of Retention

Neath Port Talbot Council, Children's Services

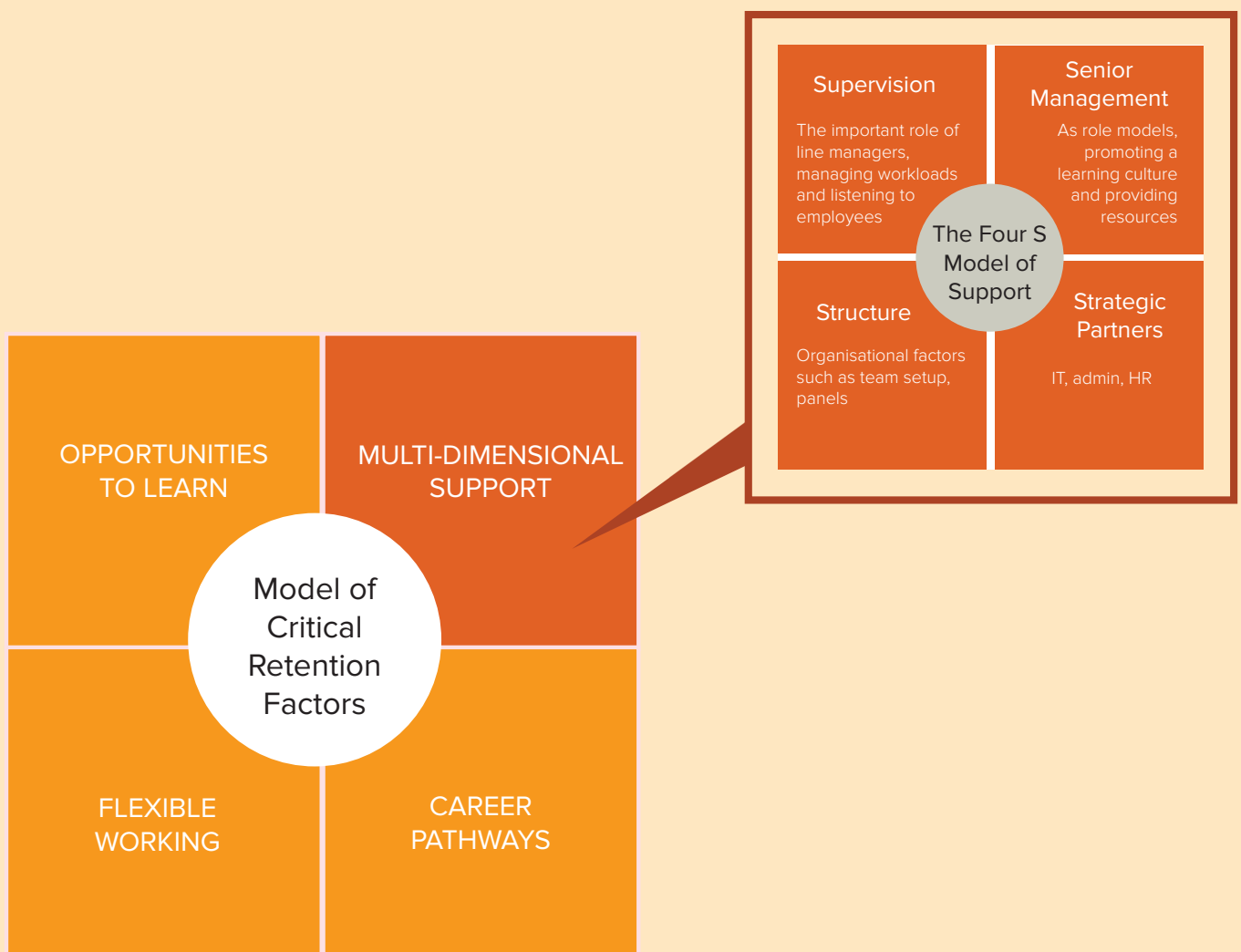
Researchers carry out their work for many reasons. In this case in 2017, there was a compelling need to establish quickly what may help retain the childcare workforce in Neath Port Talbot Council, a local authority in South Wales. The department had gone from under-performing (with a poor workforce profile including high numbers of vacancies, turnover, absence and disciplinary/grievance issues) to performing (with no vacancies and low levels of turnover, absence and other issues). Stability was key to the continued success of the department and so the research was focused on examining what had changed, and how the current workforce could be retained.

Research approach

Using a combination of reviewing the current literature, an employee survey, focus groups and interviews, the research explored what currently was keeping people in the organisation and what would keep them there in the future. Focus groups included a range of employees at different levels of seniority in the organisation. Exit interviews from previous years were also scrutinised.

Findings

The primary research in this study complements existing research in this area by identifying the following factors as critical to the retention of, in this case, social workers. A review of the literature, alongside collecting the views of the social workers at the Council, found that *providing comprehensive and visible support* was the most critical factor for retention.



Multi-dimensional support

A review of the literature, alongside collecting the views of the social workers at the Council, found that *providing comprehensive and visible support* was the most critical factor for retention.

Support needs to be multi-dimensional. The different dimensions can be described as below, in the Four S model - Supervisor, Senior Management, Structure, Strategic Partners.

Comprehensive support was found to be critical since it promotes the important concept of shared responsibility which was indicated both in the literature⁷ and in the primary research. The possibilities of 'getting it wrong' are high in social work and social workers can quickly feel vulnerable and alone if support mechanisms are not in place.

"...[there] seems to be a lot more processes in place now...to protect everybody... they add to the feeling of security, and that if somebody else knows about it, it's a shared responsibility".

"The support one is big for us...it could be going really well, everything's busy and chaotic or you've got lots on but if you feel you've got the support then it's fine".

Supervision – the role of the line manager

All aspects of support are important, but the research and the existing literature suggest that the role of the line manager is critical. With the right skills, they are able to keep stress to a minimum by allocating caseloads appropriately⁸, fighting for additional resources, maintaining the right thresholds, closing cases and stepping cases down to alternative services. Their experience and knowledge provide vital professional support and they are the ones who can counsel employees and provide them with important learning opportunities. They are also in a position to agree flexible working arrangements and help promote a healthy work-life balance⁹.

"I don't feel like I have to keep quiet about things...I feel like my voice is heard".

"It is hard but when you have got a supportive team and manager you can do it".

Senior Management

In times of difficulty and stability alike, support from the senior management team is vital¹⁰, not least because they are in a position to promote a 'learning culture'¹¹ – one that involves reward and recognition, rather than a 'blame culture' and an environment free from bullying and other negative behaviour. Having a management team who are visible and approachable is also important – social workers need to be able to be comfortable in seeking their advice and require their physical presence to reinforce that felt sense of support. The primary research highlighted that consistency from senior managers was also important both to social workers and team managers, suggesting that paying attention to the cohesiveness of the senior management team should also be a priority.

Senior managers can also influence the physical environment, resources and facilities that provide another aspect of support to employees - social workers value home working facilities and an adequate office base. They are also in a position to

ensure there is regular communication, involvement, and that career and learning opportunities that social workers value are made available to them¹²

"I feel really listened to by senior managers".

"You can knock on doors"

Structure

The primary research revealed that social workers value the advice and support given in legal surgeries and various panels such as the Permanency Panel. The key here seemed to be the fact that such support mechanisms were firmly part of the structure and the weekly schedule. Social workers value team building events and other ways of reinforcing the team ethos. As much of social work is carried out alone, social workers need the back-up of their colleagues and the emotional release they can provide^{13, 14, 15}. Social workers said:

"The team is good – informal support is important"

"For me the team is what keeps me here as well, it's a good, stable team and a lot of good camaraderie within the team"

Strategic Partners

The support of strategic partners (IT, administration and HR) is also considered important and features prominently in the literature¹⁶ and primary research. Social workers reporting increased paperwork due to outside influences such as the Welsh Government and court mechanisms value good administrative and IT support. The HR business partner approach¹⁷ adopted by Children's Services appears to have been appreciated by employees who valued the face to face and swift response that this set-up provides.

"The set-up of HR with dedicated roles in Children's Services meant there was an immediate point of contact. I rang HR and they were very supportive".

Opportunities to Learn, Flexibility and Career Pathways

The Four 'S' Factors we discuss above are the focus of the case study. There are however, further factors that the research suggests contribute significantly to how well the Childcare Social Workers feel supported and 'cared for':

- Social Workers in the Council appeared to place great importance on learning opportunities, which serves to underline the significance of ongoing learning and development, even for an experienced workforce.
- The need for flexibility is a clear theme of the primary research, as mentioned above in the context of organisational support. As Amy Richman¹⁸ found, an organisation's work-life policies contribute to a supportive culture, the effects of which go beyond those of flexibility alone.

Although career pathways did not appear prominently in the research, there is evidence to suggest that their importance should be acknowledged and that organisations should maximise the positive effect this factor can have on retention. Without clearly communicated career pathways, it is very likely that retention would be adversely affected¹⁹. They appeared to feature less prominently in the literature and in the primary research because they are now prevalent and working well in many social service settings²⁰.

Recommendations for a Retention Strategy

The following recommendations for a retention strategy for Children's Services aim to retain talented employees by ensuring Children's Services remains a place where people want to work.

Critical retention factors



Provide support to social workers in each area of the Four S model: Supervision, Senior management, Structures and Strategic partners. This includes:

- Train line managers to be effective supervisors, coaches and mentors, who provide emotional support to their employees, good caseload management, professional advice, career/learning opportunities and recognition
- Senior managers will role model a professional and positive culture by being visible and approachable, promoting a culture of learning from mistakes, rewarding and recognising employees and actively promoting flexible working and learning opportunities
- Managers will strengthen the support teams can provide by encouraging team building events and the concept of 'one big team' through conferences and regular group communication
- Structural support via the existence of legal surgeries and panels
- Working with our strategic partners to provide responsive IT, administrative and HR support



Ensure social workers voices are heard through the **practice improvement groups**, task and finish groups and active consultation on issues affecting employees



Communicate aims, objectives and progress on a regular basis through quarterly service wide communication events, newsletters, the intranet and internet



Recognise and reward innovative, excellent work and promote this to external bodies and the general public



Provide stimulating and appropriate **learning opportunities** to our increasingly experienced workforce and clear career pathways for all employees



Ensure flexible working such as home working, flexible working patterns and the annual leave purchase scheme are available to employees to **support work/life balance**



Monitor caseloads and offer support through temporary peaks in workload

Impact of the strategy – what happened next?

In many ways the suggested retention strategy neatly summarises the good people management practices that had been introduced and were operating well in the Council; the important point is that the strategy emphasised the need to continue to further embed them.

More than one year on (September 2018) the following is the case:

- Turnover is lower and vacancies fewer
- Other social services departments such as Adult Services are trying to replicate the good people management practices developed in the strategy
- The Head of Service reported that they were busy recruiting senior manager posts which had generated good levels of interest from current employees.

Having good retention strategies is not about achieving zero turnover, as the Head of Service reflected, some degree of ‘churn’ is a benefit to the department, and he welcomed the new ideas and fresh perspectives that new employees bring into the organisation. The leadership role, he believed, needs to be about developing people to move on, whether that be within the Council or outside.

“If you involve and value them, this creates a loyalty to the Service”.



Translating the findings to a wider context

There are many ways in which managers can demonstrate that their employees are valued, and the case study here has focused on organisational and managerial support as key strategies.

When looking at organisations beyond the field of social care, we can build on the model of critical retention factors (page 6) in order to apply the learning to a wider context. One of the things that the research has identified is the importance of having a clear retention strategy, coupled with more 'human value-added activities', such as making employees feel cared for. This may be, for example, by listening and responding to their individual needs, by encouraging teamwork, or simply by offering flexible work arrangements.

1

Recruit the right people in the first place. Select for fit and place people where they want to work

2

Devise a retention strategy using information from leavers data as well as the views of your current workforce

3

Ensure multi-dimensional support Four S model: Supervisor/Senior Management/Structure/Strategic Partners

- Train your managers to listen and respond to employees' needs and show they care
- Hold regular one to one discussions. Encourage a close relationship where managers would be able to spot a change in behaviour that may indicate a problem
- Managers are visible and role modelling supportive behaviour
- Have effective HR/IT/Admin to ensure support surrounds your employees
- Offer flexible working arrangements
- Communicate through regular meetings/process improvement groups
- Encourage a culture of effective teamwork
- Promote a learning (no blame) culture - thus encouraging innovation
- Recognise and reward good performance

4

Offer training and development opportunities to all employees, experienced or not. Be creative with a blended approach including, for example, bitesize or online learning

5

Offer career pathways to help employees to feel embedded in the organisation and to see a future with you

6

Build resilience through training particularly for those with emotionally demanding jobs, and more generally in coping with change

7

Provide adequate resourcing and infrastructure eg technology to support home-working

Conclusion

People will always leave organisations, and they will do so for a myriad of reasons. But where turnover is in excess of what may be deemed healthy and productive, organisations can take steps to mitigate this.

Collecting data to identify those most likely to leave can be an effective way of pre-empting accelerated turnover. People analytics are being used increasingly to provide insights which can feed into decision-making and can be particularly useful in informing HR processes and initiatives such as talent management. Research by Lee et al (2018)²¹ supports this; they suggest delving more deeply into leaver data in order to identify current employees with similar characteristics who may be at risk of leaving.

A further strategy to pay attention to is building your organisation's resilience. We can define resilience as being "change-ready, and responding well to change"²². Research tells us that our ability to be resilient is likely to vary over time, and in different circumstances. If managers can anticipate employees' reactions to changes which may be perceived as negative –possible 'shocks', such as a senior leader moving on for example – they are then in a position to provide extra support, thus retaining key talent for the organisation.

The changing picture

There is a changing picture of demographics in the workplace, coupled with the increase of the gig economy, which will continue to challenge the traditional model of permanent employment.

Added to this, the younger generation now emerging into the world of work are bringing with them a new set of engagement policies. The so-called 'Millennials' have high expectations of themselves, like to be challenged, yet hold work-life balance as an important priority. They are also regarded as having less loyalty to their employer. So we need to build into our talent management strategies the reality that the younger generations will be more likely to switch jobs more regularly.

With all this considered, it's increasingly unlikely that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to retention – and talent management more broadly – will continue to be wholly effective. A greater degree of flexibility may well be required, and leaders should have conversations with individuals in order to learn what needs adjusting to build and maintain engagement. As our case study suggests, employees respond when they have a felt sense of being understood and supported. Having a strategy may not be enough.

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UK Office

Roffey Park Institute, Forest Road, Horsham, West Sussex,
RH12 4TB, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1293 851644
Fax: +44 (0) 1293 851565
Email: info@roffeypark.com

Roffey Park Institute is a Charity, Registered No 254591

Asia Pacific Office

Roffey Park Asia Pacific Pte Ltd, 3 Temasek Avenue,
Level 21 Centennial Tower, Singapore 039190

Tel: +65 6549 7840 / 7841 / 7842
Fax: +65 6549 7011
Email: singapore@roffeypark.com

Company registration 201015595E