

Retaining talent with leadership that cares

JULIE THOMAS explains how retention relies on creating a culture of support through caring leadership

Abstract

.....

If you're a manager struggling with retention you may be regarding Brexit with some trepidation. However – Brexit aside – our world is increasingly fast, complex and ever-changing. We therefore need to find ways of retaining our top talent despite these conditions. The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is well within our control: it relies on creating a supportive and caring culture, which not only aids retention but creates the conditions for an engaged and productive workforce. This research comprised of a literature review and interviews with social workers at Neath Port Talbot Council, exploring the role of good organisational and HR practice combined with effective line management.

What's new

When analysing why people leave the causes can be categorised into 'push' and 'pull' factors; that is factors to do with the current organisation that push people out of the door, and factors that entice people away (Taylor, 2014). They can also be categorised as unavoidable (for example retirement) or involuntary (for example redundancy). However, more helpful is the idea that turnover is either controllable or uncontrollable from an organisation's point of view. It may be unwise to assume that personal choices such as retirement or not returning after maternity leave are 'unavoidable' – if the conditions are attractive enough such employees may choose to stay.

Organisations have more control over turnover than it may at first appear (Taylor, 2014). Retention strategies could cover identifying potential 'pull' factors, and making changes such as enhancing career structures. They could also identify root causes of dissatisfaction in terms of 'push' factors, as well as ensuring

recruitment strategies and workforce planning are effective (so getting the right people in the right numbers joining the organisation in the first place).

Literature in this area describes evidence-based retention strategies in the following areas – recruitment, selection, socialisation, training and development, compensation and rewards, supervision and engagement (Allen et al, 2010). Some of these can be 'controlled' at organisation level while others lie firmly in the hands of line managers. Indeed Taylor (2014)

suggests turnover can be reduced by giving responsibility to managers. Which all suggests that effective retention results from a combination of good organisational and HR practice and skilled, competent managers.

Building on previous work, recent research emphasises a caring and supportive culture as critical to a successful retention strategy. Not only do you need supportive organisational structures, you also need genuinely supportive managers at all levels who demonstrate their

values through their actions as well as words.

Key findings

In 2017 there was a compelling need to quickly establish what might help retain the childcare workforce in Neath Port Talbot Council, a local authority in South Wales. The department had gone from under-performing

Managing retention: Top tips

- ▶ **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. Analyse any data you have, including data about 'stayers'
- ▶ **Line managers are key but may need incentives to focus on this issue.** Consider making retention high profile – make it an agenda item that managers regularly report back on. Think carefully about having targets though; some turnover may be desirable

- ▶ **What works for other organisations may not work for you.** Seek the views of your workforce before implementing any retention strategy and tailor it to your organisation. You may even need individual department retention strategies



The Four S model



The different dimensions can be described in the Four S model (see box-out above right).

Supervision

All aspects of support are important but the role of the line manager was found to be critical. With the right skills they are able to keep employee stress to a minimum by allocating caseloads appropriately, fighting for additional resources, maintaining the right thresholds, closing cases and stepping cases down to alternative services. They can

provide vital professional support and 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 balance.

Senior management

In times of difficulty and stability alike support from the senior management team is vital; not least because they are in a position to promote a learning culture that involves reward and recognition rather than a 'blame culture', and that is free from bullying and other negative behaviour. Having a management team that is visible and approachable is also important – social workers need to be comfortable in seeking their advice and require their physical presence to reinforce that 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 be a priority. Senior managers can ▶

(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). But stability was key to the continued success of the department and so

this research examined what had changed, and how the current workforce could be retained.

The research, which included a literature review, focus groups and interviews with current employees, discovered that support needs to be multi-dimensional.

Neath Port Talbot Council case study: Employee quotes

Area	Employee comment
On supervision	"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"
On senior managers	"I feel really listened to by senior managers"
	"You can knock on doors"
On structure	"The team is good – informal support is important"
	"For me the team is what keeps me here; it's a good stable team and [there's] a lot of good camaraderie within the team"
On strategic partners	"The setup 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"

..... **Retention strategies all organisations can learn from**

- ▶ **Recruit the right people in the first place** and place people where they want to work
- ▶ **Devise a retention strategy** using information from leavers data as well as the views of your current workforce
- ▶ **Ensure multi-dimensional support** using the Four S model: supervisor/senior management/structure/strategic partners
- ▶ **Offer training and development opportunities** to all employees, experienced or not. Be creative with a blended approach including for example bite-size or online learning
- ▶ **Offer career pathways** to help employees feel embedded in the organisation and to see a future with you
- ▶ **Build resilience through training**, particularly for those with emotionally-demanding jobs, and more generally in coping with change
- ▶ **Provide adequate resourcing and infrastructure** e.g. technology to support home-working

also influence the physical environment, resources and home working facilities. They are in a position to ensure there is regular communication, involvement, and that career and learning opportunities are made available.

Structure

The primary research revealed that social workers value the advice and support given in legal surgeries and various panels. The key seemed to be making support mechanisms firmly part of the weekly schedule. Social workers also valued team-building events and other ways of reinforcing the team ethos.

Strategic partners

The support of strategic partners (IT, administration and HR) was also an important factor. Social workers reported increased paperwork due to outside influences such as the Welsh government and court mechanisms, and valued good administrative and IT support. The HR business partner approach adopted by Neath Port Talbot Council appears

to have been appreciated by employees, who valued a swift face-to-face response.

Opportunities to learn, flexibility and career pathways

The Four S model was the focus of the case study. But there were further factors that contributed significantly to how well the childcare social workers felt supported and 'cared for'.

Social workers 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 flexible working arrangements is a clear theme of the primary research, as mentioned above in the context of organisational support.

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.

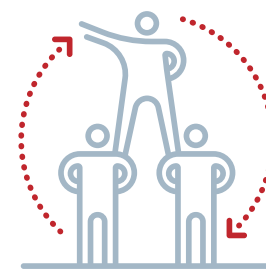
Comprehensive support was found to be critical since it also promoted the important concept of shared responsibility, which was indicated both in the literature and in the primary research. The possibility of 'getting it wrong' is high in social work and social workers can quickly feel vulnerable and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

From research to reality

Looking to organisations beyond social care we can build on this model to apply the learning to a wider context. One of the things that the research has identified is

..... **References**

- For a full list of references and acknowledgements please read the full research paper, *The Key to Retaining Talent: creating a culture of support through caring leadership*, by Julie Thomas and Roffey Park Institute (2019).
- Allen, D., Bryant, P., and Vardaman, J. (2010). *Retaining Talent: Replacing Misconceptions with Evidence-Based Strategies*. Academy of Management Perspectives, 42(2), p48-64.
- Eberly, M., Horn, P., Lee, T., and Li, J. (2017). Managing Employee Retention and Turnover with 21st Century Ideas. *Organizational Dynamics*, 47(2), p88-98.
- Taylor, S. (2014). *Resourcing and Talent Management*. (6th edition). London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development/Kogan Page.



..... **About the author**

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 more than 20 years' experience of working in HR in both the private and public sectors. She gained an MA in 2017 with her research on the retention of childcare social workers.

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.

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

The future holds yet more instability and shocks, but if you focus on what your organisation can control you may find that you develop resilience to change through a loyal and productive workforce. **HR**

This essay was winner of the 2018 Roffey Park and HR magazine academic research competition. To read the full research paper please visit www.roffeypark.com