

Retaining Core, Critical & Scarce Skills in the Energy Industry

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An organization within a major energy providing industry is facing staff retention challenges. In spite of their retention strategy that was implemented over the past three years, employees with core, critical and scarce skills are still leaving. The study explored employee motivation theories underlying employee retention in organizations. A qualitative study was conducted in order to determine factors that influence employees to remain or leave the employer. The findings revealed that factors such as leadership style of superiors, ability to exercise control with respect to decision-making and problem-solving, and a desire for career advancement and skills development play a role in retaining specialist staff.

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Introduction

Employee retention is one of the major challenges that organizations face today. Attracting the best talent is a difficult task, and retaining these employees is even more difficult. Globalization has worsened the situation, as employees are both ready and willing to change jobs and relocate to any part of the world. Managers around the world are concerned about the retention of skilled employees, and are very conscious of the high rate of employee turnover. Skilled employees in today's business are the major differentiating factor when determining the success of a business, making the employee retention environment very competitive. This is as a result of dependence on the expertise of these employees to compete effectively and to gain competitive advantage in the market (Samuel & Chipunza, 2009).

According to Carr & Jones (2001), the demand for core, critical and scarce skills outnumbers the pool of available talent. As a result, people in these skill categories experience high levels of stress and they tend to easily resign from their jobs. A war on talent, as reported by Stairs, Galpin &

Linley (2006), was predicted to start in 2007. Organizations were managing staff retention on a 'knife edge'. Elaborate strategies for attracting and retaining talent need to be devised in order for organizations to maintain a competitive edge and to ensure their long term survival (Stairs et al., 2006).

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In the past, employees leaving their jobs voluntarily was seldom an occurrence. However, this is now the norm in the workplace; a shift which has been intensified by an increase in job mobility. Changes in the work environment are so complex that employers were slow to comprehend that the power balance of the work relationship had shifted from employer to employee. A new concept, 'employee turnover' was therefore introduced. As a result, a management tool known as 'employee retention' was developed to respond to employee turnover (McKeown, 2002). In response to the employee turnover challenge, many organizations changed their remuneration packages to be in line with what similar companies in the market were paying. According to McKeown (2002), remuneration packages alone were not totally effective in helping employers to keep their employees. In addition to the remuneration packages, other factors such as, safety and workplace health should be included to make the employee happy (McKeown, 2002).

Problem Investigated

The study is focused on a department within the organization which provides consulting, advisory, supporting and other specialist services in the energy industry in a developing country context. The department comprises predominantly core, scarce, skilled and experienced subject matter experts in the engineering environment, who have acquired a good reputation in providing outstanding technology services to their customers over time.

According to management, the department is losing its core, critical and scarce skills to the external market every year. The trends on staff movement were discussed in various management meetings to determine the severity of the problem. As a result, management identified the loss of skills as one of the department's high risks. Although a strategy has been implemented, the organization still experiences loss of these skills and it is evident that the strategy has not been effective. Recruitment policies and processes, as well as the national shortage of specific skills have contributed to the delay or inability to replace the employees that have left. Lack of skills increased the workload for remaining employees, hampering their ability to execute the overall operations plan and brought about an undesirable effect on service delivery.

Aim of the Research

The main aim of the research is to: a) determine critical factors in respect of employees wanting to remain with the

organization, and b) identify which factors may result in employees wanting to leave the organization. Such a study can lead to recommendations which can be incorporated into the strategy of the organization to retain core, critical and scarce skills.

Literature Review

Organizations hire people from different backgrounds and employees demand more fulfilling jobs (Mitchell, 1973). Traditional models of motivators relied solely on financial rewards, which in terms of Maslow's position, helped employees to achieve their basic needs of food and shelter. In the 1960s and 1970s career progression emerged as an additional motivator to satisfy the employees' need for achievement, status and recognition. For this generation, motivators go beyond tangible rewards, shifting to intangibles like meaning, value fit and the ability to make a worthwhile contribution.

Since the current generation of employees has grown up in a world of choice and rapid change, they may not stay with one employer for a long time if their self-actualization needs are not satisfied (Stairs et al, 2006). Managers and organizational leaders should seek to comprehend and address employee motivation successfully to be able to lead the organization (Amabile, 1996). It has been noted that five features which trigger recent theories of human motivation are needs, reinforcement, cognition, job characters and emotions (Ramlall, 2004). Three common motivational theories are Maslow's Needs Hierarchy, Herzberg's

Two Factors and Vroom's Expectancy Theories. Maslow's theory focuses on individual needs while Herzberg scrutinized motivation from the perspectives of the interaction between the individual and his/her work (Cesare & Sadri, 2003). Vroom's theory proposes that people are driven to behave the way they do, and produce combinations of outcomes that should be desired and expected.

Maslow developed his Hierarchy of Needs theory because he believed that human beings desire to become self-actualizing. He held that human potential being underestimated is an unexplained area. Human needs can be grouped into at least five areas, namely: physiological, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization.

Equity theory stresses the point that individuals are not only concerned with their own rewards, but also compare their compensation to what others receive. The Expectancy Model of Motivation, as cited by Ramlall (2004) highlights the causes of people's expectations and connects effort with performance and job satisfaction.

Attitudes of employees towards their jobs and work environments influence their retention.

It has also been acknowledged that the attitudes of employees towards their jobs and work environments influence their retention. Job satisfaction is a catalyst to employee turnover. Employee

motivation is a complex issue and involves a combination of factors influencing individuals.

According to Mak and Sockel (2001) and Stum (1998) job satisfaction is believed to be an important driver of employee performance. It affects productivity, quality and morale, and hence influences commitment and reduces turnover and absenteeism. According to Benest (2008), competitive salaries are important to employees but are not sufficient to retain them. When employees do not see the relevance of their job to an organization, they may feel that they do not belong to the unit. According to Stum (1998), in most cases employees would like to learn and grow. They also expect employers to give them an opportunity to grow.

Employees may leave an organization if the reward strategy does not appreciate their performance, or lacks consideration for skills and experience, or cannot match the compensation system of the competitors. A meaningful job is the most powerful motivator of behavior. Employees appreciate working in a safe and comfortable environment. Factors such as family responsibilities are also related to employee retention, because one's family, community and other life activities outside work influence one's decision to stay or leave (Hausknecht et al, 2008). Employees can be frustrated and dissatisfied with a workload that is less or more than their capacity (Jan, 2010). Certain management styles may cause employees to leave an organization. Employees also like to be in control

of some aspects of their work and have the ability to influence the way things are done.

Research Methodology

This study used qualitative data collection methods, namely, open-ended questionnaires, in-depth unstructured interviews and secondary data such as exit interview materials. This approach ensured triangulation. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained. Data collection occurred during August-September 2010. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting participants for this study. This means purposefully choosing certain elements of the population. The key participants were employees whose skills have been categorized into core, critical and scarce. The study invited participation from engineers, technologists technicians, artisans and electricians in the organization.

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A total of 28 people completed the questionnaires, and in-depth interviews were conducted with two managers and one consultant. Respondents were assured about confidentiality and were requested to complete informed consent forms before commencing the interviews or completing the questionnaires. Questions focused on factors which were important for employees and caused them to remain with the organization, what benefits they derived from working at the

company, and what factors would cause them to leave. The interpretive inductive approach was applied to analyze data.

Leadership Style

Participants reported that they valued democratic leadership that allowed them to operate independently with little guidance. One participant was quoted as saying, "To be trusted and given the freedom to work as a professional, to make decisions, to be self-managed and not to be micro-managed". This is consistent with the study of Stairs et al. (2006) that employees would like to be in control of some aspects of their work and be able to influence the way things are done. This is also confirmed by Maslow's Needs Theory that people seek fulfillment of needs in self-expression, recognition, having some voice in job affairs, doing something worthwhile, and demanding a chance to grow. Bititci, Mendibil, Nudurupati, Garengo and Turner (2006) reported that management style is dictated by the organisation culture.

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Participants declared their management to be good and fair. Moreover, they proclaimed that management had a mature attitude towards work and allowed employees the freedom to explore possibilities with respect to problems and solutions. Mak and Sockel (2001) stated that if employees perceive that they have supervisor support, they could be more

satisfied and motivated, with less stress and better performance. Stairs et al. (2006) mentioned that management should strive to build positive emotions, harness strengths and drive engagement.

Job Satisfaction

Some participants would like to be given work that is stimulating, meaningful and challenging to enable them to make a valuable contribution. Other participants mentioned that the attractive thing about working in the environment was the opportunity to do different things. This situation was highlighted by Nohria, Groysberg and Lee (2008) who said that, in order to achieve job satisfaction, managers and supervisors should design significant, exciting and stimulating tasks. Employees' minds should be stimulated to think widely about the ways in which they could contribute to bringing about change in the system. Ramlall (2004) mentioned that employees should be given additional tasks and difficult ones, perhaps even those normally performed by their seniors or supervisors. Therefore, jobs should be restructured to include thought provoking tasks with more responsibility. These authors' ideas are in line with the Hygiene Motivation Theory that proposed that employees define satisfying encounters in relation to features core to the job content, such as achievement and growth.

Teamwork

Participants indicated favoring an environment where teamwork is encouraged, and also working within a compe-

tent team. This was exemplified by one participant who said: “Good team relations, that is, colleagues that are competent and willing to assist in the bigger team efforts”. Stairs et al. (2006) reported that employees need an inclusive organizational culture where the emphasis is on teamwork and co-operation between the groups. Nohria et al. (2008) suggested that the most effective way to unite a team is to provide a conducive environment that stimulates teamwork, collaboration, openness and friendship. It was the view of some participants that the organization has the best or at least very good specialists in almost all (technical) disciplines of the business. The majority of the participants said that the advantage of being in the environment was having easy access to human resources, which then helps in making quick decisions and drawing conclusions. It has been reported that generally, working ‘inside’ the organization allows one to address issues directly and willingly, compared to an external consultant, who can only work on issues that they are asked to investigate.

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Reward, Recognition & Remuneration

Some participants indicated that they would like to work in an environment where outputs are appreciated and out-

standing performance is recognized. Ramlall (2004) reported that an employee will work hard if they are certain of receiving a reward for completing a task. Moreover, Stairs et al. (2006) agreed with Ramlall that an employee’s satisfaction level rises when they perceive they are being fairly rewarded, be it financially or non-financially. Employees’ decisions to work hard for a reward will therefore be driven by what they have experienced in the past in terms of performance and rewards.

It was mentioned that the organization paid respectable remunerations, but that these salaries could be better. Other participants pointed out that they were remunerated well. Some participants reported that they prefer a work environment which pays an adequate or high salary to correctly reflect the value of one’s experience, knowledge and skill, and salaries that are above market rates. This requires organizations to establish reward systems that are perceived to be fair and just. This is consistent with Herzberg’s Motivator Hygiene Theory that if hygiene factors such as remuneration, job security and general work environment are not acceptable, employees may become demotivated. Stairs et al. (2006) noted that traditional models of motivators relied on financial rewards which, in Maslow’s terms, helped employees achieve their basic needs.

Stakeholder Involvement

It was clear that some participants valued interaction and collaboration with stakeholders of different levels, back-

ground and interest. It pleased them when they acted as the middle man between senior management and middle technical staff, where they ensured that management priorities and technical requirements were integrated and aligned. In addition to these, they preferred to be mediators between production and research, which allowed them to facilitate production as well as obtain support for innovative projects.

Lockwood (2007) found that employee engagement has emerged as a critical driver for organizational achievement, because it affects employee retention, efficiency and loyalty. Therefore it is closely correlated to customer satisfaction, company reputation and overall shareholder value. It has been concluded that if the employees realize the connection between their job and organizational strategy and also understand the importance of their job to the success of the organization, they would be more engaged. Engaged employees are passionate about their work, innovative and drive organizational advancement. Goodman (1971) suggested that employees be involved and allowed to participate in the accomplishment of objectives. This means involvement in decision-making where the outcome involves them.

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Participants mentioned that working in the organization gave them an oppor-

tunity to participate in national activities. They also mentioned that through involvement in committees where the development of technology and technological changes affecting the organisation were discussed, they were operating in their field of expertise and were exposed to a range of new technologies.

It was observed that they made a real contribution to the improvement of the company. This was supported by one participant who said that “working at a national level, where I am able to support the network planners in all the regions. This keeps me both challenged and motivated”. They also acknowledged that they were able to influence the medium to long term development of the local industry. In addition to this, they had greater opportunities to travel and network with specialists around the country. Besides national involvement, they indicated that they were solving the region’s technical problems, and in turn acquiring knowledge. It was also highlighted that they gained experience in developing electricity distribution line hardware technology, thereby keeping in touch with new technology. They also admitted that they made decisions and managed technology with far reaching consequences, both in the organisation and in the industry as a whole.

Work Environment

The participants pointed out that in this environment they were able to work independently and make decisions to a certain extent. This was supported by one participant who said: “having a cer-

tain amount of freedom to manage my activities to suit my needs". Many employees would like to have a dedicated office as opposed to a cubicle. One participant explained why a dedicated office was needed: "An enabling working environment that will allow me to do my work effectively and efficiently". Stairs et al. (2006) noted that employees appreciate working in a safe environment and that they need a comfortable workstation and secure parking facilities.

It was indicated by some participants that flexible working time or flexible hours were important characteristics for their ideal work environment. One was quoted as saying: 'having core hours is fine but being unable to shift hours from one day to the next is restrictive'. In addition to this, some needed the freedom to work at various office locations and to have access to technology such as 3G connections. Stairs et al. (2006) reported that employees need to be supported to achieve a balance between their roles within and outside of the work environment to enable them to meet the demands placed on them. This means different things to different individuals and flexible work practices are proposed to address this issue. Hausknecht et al. (2008) agreed with Stairs et al. (2006) and suggested alternative work hours to reduce pressure between competing work and non-work demands.

Participants appreciated the work-life balance opportunities such as flexible working times and working from home on some days. According to the participants, these practices contribute to

the retention of outstanding employees. Others mentioned that the flexibility helps them to work independently and take ownership of their work and their own time management. This was exemplified by one participant who said: "I could negotiate flexible hours to suit my personal needs with a child at school"

Ethical Values & Professionalism

Participants stated that they needed to be respected and trusted, to be given the freedom to work as professionals and to make decisions.

Participants stated that they needed to be respected and trusted, to be given the freedom to work as professionals and to make decisions. They indicated that they would like to work in an environment where honesty, integrity, truthfulness and high morals and ethics were highly valued. Rucci et al. (1998) stated that this calls for management to give staff greater decision-making authority to empower them. Leadership should also take responsibility for the culture that will keep business models working. This was believed to encourage employees to be quick to respond, to become more creative and continually improve their service to customers.

Image & Career Growth

According to some participants, the organization has a good reputation and image. They also indicated that they liked to be associated with the organization

because it was seen as a centre of excellence. Other participants would like to have a clear career path for career growth and potential promotion opportunities while others would like the career path to be coupled with definite career advancement. Jan (2010) reported that if an organization does not consider providing opportunities to employees to advance in their careers, this creates a feeling of frustration among them. Stairs et al. (2006) advised that organizations should facilitate opportunities for development and career progression for their employees. Benest (2008) also advised that this can be achieved by providing appropriate and flexible work challenges, continuous learning, challenging work, assignments which stretch but do not overwhelm the employee, continual training and development, and competitive pay.

Skills Development

Participants would like to be in an environment where there are opportunities for continual professional development. To some this meant being among specialists who have technical knowledge coupled with years of experience. To others it meant access to resources, meaning money and people to execute work and to keep up with the latest developments. One participant was quoted as saying “what I have realized is that most of the decision making processes require immediate and interactive communications to enable one to solve most engineering problems. Decision making requires extensive knowledge, which in turn requires experience to solve these problems”.

Stum (1998) reported that, in most cases, employees would like to learn and grow. Besides formal learning programs, there should be other learning opportunities like job sharing, task services, conferences and expanded responsibilities. It was also recommended that managers should provide affordable experiential learning. Most participants confirmed the existence of opportunities for empowerment and self-development, depending on whether they would benefit the department and the organization. One participant was quoted saying: “what makes the job worthwhile is the opportunity to learn and take ownership, take on other non-core work for professional growth, thus advancing my electrical engineering management knowledge and experience”.

Communication

Participants preferred an environment where business matters are communicated to all to enable them to contribute to decisions that are important to the organization. Rucci et al. (2000) mentioned that one of the barriers to trust is misunderstanding and suggested that organizations ensure clear communication at all times. Stairs et al. (2006) supported this by suggesting timely and relevant communication that is tailored for functions and groups.

Support Services

Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with poor support business services and ineffective support policies and infrastructure, such as HR, buying etc. Sheridan (1992) reported that organiza-

tional culture values have an influence on human resource strategies including selection, placement policies, promotion and development procedures, and reward systems. Nohria et al. (2008) mentioned that employees acknowledged that managers have certain powers to influence the way in which organizational processes and policies are implemented, and that they do have some discretion within their area of influence.

Performance Management Processes

Participants raised the concern that the annual performance appraisal methods are highly flawed and do not contribute to quality outputs.

Participants raised the concern that the annual performance appraisal methods are highly flawed and do not contribute to quality outputs. Another cause of concern was perceived inequitable treatment, lack of transparency, and honest and timely feedback by supervisors. To add to this, one participant held the view that the unique and totally over analytical performance review seemed to be designed by engineers for engineers. It was further alleged that the system made management feel in control to manage the details. Goodman (1971) indicated that ratings and evaluations of employees have not been very successful, mainly because they have been used critically, destructively, and with little sound data to support the evaluation. Within this negative attitude towards appraisal,

Goodman (1971) proposed that good performance by workers depended on their self-motivation and the supervisor's motivation.

Equity theory stresses the point that individuals are not only concerned with their rewards but also compare their amount to what others receive. When people perceive an imbalance, there will be tension. Fairness or tension provides the basis for motivation. Nohria et al. (2008) advised the implementation of fair, trustworthy and transparent processes. This would help employees to understand the rationale behind the decision even if they did not agree with some aspects of the processes.

Resources & Workload

It was stated by many participants that the resources to make a difference were not always available and the ability to improve systems and processes to the benefit of the business was difficult with the available resources. Moreover, the workload was too much. One participant shared the same sentiment and said: "I also don't believe we have enough or even the right staff to handle the demands and workload in the organization. This places additional burden and pressure on me". Jan (2010) reported that employees can become frustrated and dissatisfied by a workload that is less or more than their capacity. Mak and Sockel (2001) indicated that in an organization that is too demanding and unreliable with its employees' needs, employee burnout could be frequently experienced. This burnout is related to work stressors such

as role vagueness, conflict and inadequate resources.

Too Much Administration

Participants complained that they were often overwhelmed with administrative work. Despite the wonderful systems and processes in place, there is still a lot of administration work to be done. One participant elaborated on the issue and said “this is time consuming and prevents us from doing what we actually enjoy doing”. It was evident that employees did not understand the importance of the admin work. Goodman (1971) alluded that only organizational goals are often considered and hence suggested that workers should be helped to achieve their goals within the organizational goals.

Customer Demands

Respondents indicated that some customers sometimes had no idea what they wanted. It is their feeling that they deal with customers who sometimes refuse to co-operate and ignore Head Office requests or cause problems. Rucci et al. (1998) highlighted that the attitudes of employees towards their jobs and the work environment influence employee retention, and employee customer satisfaction affects financials and more. Therefore, organizations should measure and manage the drivers of employee retention and customer satisfaction. Management’s decisions should be customer-oriented, and their communication on organization goals and vision should be done effectively.

Repetitive Work

Participants proclaimed that their exposure to work assignments was only in their areas of responsibility. However, after five years, they found that the work was repetitive, and also that they only used a small part of the knowledge they had gained at tertiary education level. One participant from management indicated that although he was comfortable with his job, he was getting bored because he knew his job inside out. Goodman (1971) advised that supervisors and managers should give employees more freedom and responsibility to direct their own activities and accomplish organisational objectives. This approach would provide an individual with the opportunity to meet egoistic needs, to increase job responsibilities and fully utilize their abilities.

Office Environment

Participants indicated that they were deprived of exposure to the real plant activities, because they were not being hands-on every day. The office environment was perceived as not being conducive to their development as professionals, and it would not improve their confidence nor speed up their career development and engineering expertise. One participant elaborated on this and said “personally, I am still young and energetic and prefer an environment that will allow and enable me to perform hands on work and apply the basic principles of engineering”. Deci (1972) suggested that in order to motivate employees intrinsically, supervisors should design interesting and challenging tasks and allow

employees to participate in decision-making.

Limited Career Growth

Participants were of the view that there was no opportunity for growth.

Many participants were concerned that in many cases there appeared to be a 'glass ceiling' in terms of the promotion within the organization. Therefore, participants were of the view that there was no opportunity for growth. In some cases employees' man-grades (grade of the job the person does) were not the same as their post-grades (grade of the job profile). Participants also reported that training for Engineers-in-training was not enough for them to understand what their customers in the business regions do. Jan (2010) stated that if an organization does not consider providing opportunities to employees to advance their career, then this will create a feeling of frustration among them. Stairs et al. (2006) advised organizations to facilitate opportunities for development and career progression for employees.

Travelling

One participant mentioned that too much travel away from home can be a problem. This particular participant travelled frequently from Durban to Johannesburg. Job descriptions often specify the requirements of a job. In addition to this, management reminds candidates of the requirements during the

interview and inquires whether a candidate will be comfortable with the requirements.

Recruitment

Participants observed that the entry level qualifications for the various job levels were too high and that suitable persons with technical experience could not be obtained to do the work. A participant expressed his frustration and said: "It has a direct effect on me, because we don't get the right people for doing the work effectively". Nohria et al. (2008) highlighted that employees acknowledged that managers have certain powers to influence the way in which organizational processes and policies are implemented, and they do have some discretion within their area of influence.

Conclusion

It was highlighted that there were many factors in the organization that employees were satisfied with, but which did not necessarily mean that they would not leave the department. The study found the following factors to be critical to employees' decisions to stay or leave the organization: organizational culture, leadership style and support, autonomy, team work, recognition, remuneration, flexible working hours, challenging work, career and skills development. However, the availability of these factors does not imply satisfaction and no single factor can influence employees in favor of the employer. A number of issues were also highlighted, such as: the flawed performance management process, a skills

shortage that led to work overload, unreasonable customer demands and management not being supportive, limited career growth, the lack of career paths, and unfair reward and recognition practices.

Recommendations

The leadership style of those managing the specialists needs to be carefully considered. Specialist staff requires some control in decision-making and problem-solving, and should be encouraged to engage in stimulating and challenging work. Tasks that are repetitive need to be reassessed as such work can be de-motivating. Specialists should not be overloaded with administrative work but should rather be utilized for their scarce skills. A balance should be sought between company work which also includes real plant activity, and participation in work outside the organization.

Emphasis should be placed on career advancement and skills development. As much as the specialists derive satisfaction from being in charge of their own work, management should also stimulate a teamwork approach as this can allow for specialists to engage in idea generation and perhaps start joint projects. The performance management system needs to be evaluated to ascertain the implementation thereof and the remuneration and reward systems should be considered on an individual and group level. Organizational processes and policies should facilitate the work of the specialists and specialists

can perhaps be included when decisions are made regarding the strategy of the organization and how best to meet customer demands.

The organization should not try to address each factor that may cause employees to resign, but should seek a solution that is systematic, which would solve the problem holistically. Employees' opinions should be explored frequently because their environment changes rapidly and this impacts either negatively or positively on their decision to leave or stay.

The study noted the challenges of the engineering skills shortage and the difficulty in acquiring new employees in this field. The factors that influence staff turnover impact directly on shortage of skills, because the factors that cause people to leave organizations cause it to be unable to attract the people. This impacts negatively on businesses because turnover and shortage of skills causes a decrease in productivity, lack of sustainability, a declining company image, low morale, and the inability to attract competent people.

This study focused on employee perceptions. Future research needs to investigate the perceptions of the employer and determine how they would like to retain their employees.

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