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Full Length Research Paper

Developing a retention strategy for qualified staff at the Polytechnic of Namibia

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Tertiary educational institutions depend on their employees' skills, knowledge, and abilities for efficient and effective delivery of services in order to stay abreast with new changes and to achieve the vision of the institution. Therefore, attracting and retaining skilled, employees have become an important aspect for institutions. Where there are no clear retention strategies to retain employees the ultimate goals of the institution might not be achieved. The main objective of the study was to find out reasons why staff members resign after attending development programmes, which would assist the institution to developed retention strategies, as it prepares itself to become a university of science and technology that requires more and better qualified staff. The enquiry employed a case study approach because it dealt with a specific institution in Windhoek, Namibia. A triangulation method was utilised to solicit information from academics, administrative and support staff by conducting semi-structured interviews with Head of Departments (HODs) and sectional heads. A closed-ended questionnaire was distributed to 230 staff members of which 130 responded, which gave a considerable satisfactorily response rate of 65%. Research proved convincingly that there are no retention strategies in place and also no good reward systems to retain staff that attended development programmes. A total of fifty-six (56) staff members resigned from the institution after obtaining their qualification. It was evident from the interviews conducted with top management that there were no retention strategies. Employees that obtain a vertical higher degree qualify for a notch increase. However, ex-staff members noted that the notch increase was not sufficient therefore, the researcher recommended that the Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN) should develop a proper innovative retention strategy. The research focus is on Namibians and permanent resident staff that have been employed at the institution until July 2008 and hence excluded non-Namibians, who are appointed on contract. It will be in the best interest of PoN to conduct a study that focuses on quantifying the cost of recruitment and the cost of labour turnover. An investigation should be conducted to assess the roles that supervisors and senior management plays in employee retention. This paper offers PoN management an insight into the views of current and ex-staff members regarding employee retention. Retention is an ongoing issue that affects most tertiary educational institutions, therefore finding out the retention strategies and reasons why employees resign after obtaining their qualifications will benefit the PoN. This will ensure that an innovative retention strategy be develop in order to retain qualified employees that are in short supply for the growth and continuation of the institution.

Key words: Development, Institution, retention, strategy, tertiary.

INTRODUCTION

Qualified employees are scares and therefore institutions should be proactive when developing retention strategies. Retention should start with the job descriptions, orientation programmes, recruitment and selection. These are the foundations of building an effective retention strategy (Dibble, 1999: 31). When one of this are not executed satisfactorily it might have a direct effect on the period

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that the employee will remain with the organisation. In tertiary educational institutions labour turnover could lead to decrease student enrolment numbers and employee frustration due to the additional workload allocated the remaining staff. Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN) is one of the second largest tertiary educational institutions in Namibia. In 2004, the PoN renamed their vision as "Namibia's internationally recognised university of applied science and technology". This projects a status and profile that the institution seeks to achieve by 2008 (Polytechnic of Namibia, 2008: 3). Polytechnic of Namibia (2009 - 2013: 10) further stated in their PSP that they want to build an academic staff comprising at least 10% professors, 10% associate professors, 40% senior lecturers and 20% junior lecturers by 2012. This illustrated that they were now in a process of transforming. The World Bank report (2005: 66) noted that PoN found it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff including Namibians. It is therefore, in the interest of PoN to developed retention strategies to retain their current staff. There is a need to find out the reasons why people are resigning from the institution and also to the retentions strategies developed by the institution. The HR Code is the only policy document of the PoN, which is used as a guide for all human resource related matters and it does not address any retention strategies. As noted by Fisher (2005: 1), people are the sum of employees' efforts that create wealth to allow organisations to achieve their vision. Developing retention strategies is vital, particularly now that the institution has a vision of becoming a university; and thus, finding it difficult to attract more qualified staff because of the higher salaries paid by other sectors (Naris and Ukpere, 2009: 883). Effective retention strategies will motivate staff members and improve their work performance, which in turn may result in attracting more qualified people to work for the institution.

Retention

The growth in the global research market has made institutions realised that the right workforce could give them a competitive advantage (Dibble, 1999: 3). Every organisation or institution wants to have a competitive edge in order to attract more students and potential employees. Therefore, the demand for employees had increase and organisations are competing to attract and retain the best talent. The Strategic Plan Report (2004 - 2008: 19) recognised that PoN has a high staff turnover. Even the World Bank report (2005: 66) acknowledge that PoN finds it challenging to recruit and retain staff members and lose them owing to high salaries that are offered in the private and public sector, which tempts the best brains from the institution. Employees with skills in short supply or higher qualifications have more bargaining power and want to negotiate for higher salaries for their services (Dibble, 1999: 4). It is the basic demand versus supply philosophy that is being applied in the labour market by the employee and employer. It is a fact that people are motivated by money, but it also often motivates wrong behaviours and does not build commitment (Performance Management, 2006: 20). Motivation is what drives people to work (Gerson and Gerson, 2006: 7). In order for institutions to retain their staff members, they should first find out what motivates workers to work. By paying attention to what motivates them to work, one will be able to develop strategies to retain them.

People come to work for various reasons, which are mainly based on their needs. Several authors have postulated theories about what motivates people to work, for example, Maslow, Herzberg, ERG, and McClelland (Robbins et al., 2007: 143). Whilst acknowledging their theories, some theories have been criticised because their investigation was primarily about what people want from a job, and not why they leave. No differentiation was made between sectors. Higher education institutions consist of academic, administrative and support, as such, their motivating factors to work might be different.

Professional staff may enter the profession merely for altruistic reasons such as helping students to succeed; their aspiration for teaching; and to uplift the society in which they live (Naris and Ukpere, 2009: 883). However, generation Y (Gen Y) might enter academia for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. Intrinsic reasons include career opportunities and training and development opportunities and extrinsic reasons are money, status and holidays (Mayer, 2006: 63).

Non-professionals Gen Y might look for organisations that can offer them flexibility, autonomy, support for personal growth and ability to learn new things (Edgar, 2001, cited in Naris and Ukpere, 2009: 883). More than that, Dibble (1999: 4) noted that the job description, induction, recruitment and selection also have a major impact on employees decision to leave the organisation. Therefore, knowing the reasons why people leave is as important, as it will help organisations manage and developed retention strategies that meet the needs of the organisation and employees.

Key contributing factors for leaving the job were identified by Dibble (1999: 124) as: Lack of career opportunities, dead-end job, and no opportunity to go up the hierarchical structure of the organisation. Other researchers have discovered that employees' decisions to leave are influenced by factors such as salary, work-life balance, or career opportunities (Mayer, 2006; Abraham, 2007; Holland et al., 2007; De Vos et al., 2008; De Vos and Meganck, 2009). However, people resign for different reasons.

Reasons for high labour turnover in higher education institutions include the following: Dissatisfaction with relations between seniors; working conditions; few hours spent on research; excessive workload; financial rewards; lack of career opportunities; and work-life balance (Metcalf

et al., 2005: 20; De Vos and Meganck, 2009: 50). A study, which was conducted by Mayer (2006) in Australia discovered that young academic staff members' reasons for leaving are a bit different. Their decisions to leave range from workload; lack of input in decision making; wanting new challenges; teaching out of field; insufficient autonomy; poor salary; and personal circumstances (Mayer, 2006: 65). The study discovered that workload was cited as the highest, while salary was the least motivating factor for resigning.

Due to the rigid labour market, highly qualified and experienced employees who have skills that are in demand, will look for employability and not employment and will change jobs often (Holland et al., 2007: 250). People who have higher education qualifications earn better salaries because skills development improves a person's stock of human capital, and therefore, increases his or her productive potential (Barker, 2007: 206). These workers know their status in the labour market and can apply their skills to issues that can give an organisation a sustained competitive advantage (Holland et al., 2007: 250). There is also a perception that people do not stay with one organisation for a long time. For example, Gen X show little loyalty to any particular organisation (Mayer, 2006: 58) and move around in search of organisations that offer better opportunities and benefits (Abraham, 2007). High labour turnover leads to decreased morale, reputation of the organisation and affects productivity (Abraham, 2007). These challenges could be addressed by introducing retention strategies (Armstrong, 2002 cited in Millmore et al., 2002; Mayer, 2006; Holland et al., 2007; Prichard, 2007) that would help the organisation keep the employees that are in sought after fields.

Career development should be encouraged and employees who have potential should be identified and developed. This will benefit the employer by having employees with skills, knowledge and attitudes that are productive. Flexibility in terms of where and when to perform given task is an important contributing factor for employees decision to leave, therefore, academic staff should be offered flexible working hours so that they can balance their lifestyles; academic staff should be offered non-financial rewards such as recognition of efforts through teaching awards, personal growth and extra time for research purposes; non-academics should be offered non-financial rewards such as responsibility, influence, personal growth and acknowledgement for a job well done; staff should be acknowledged for a job well done; effective induction and orientation that means be prepared for the new employees arrival; organisations or institutions should create a supportive work environment; organisations or institutions should focus on securing employment by making the organisation an "employer of choice" so that employees can return or recommend others; offer training and development opportunities; create organisations' or institutions' culture where teamwork is fostered and open communication is promoted; and create fair promotional opportunities for everyone. Without successful retention programmes, organisations will bring new employees in at the front door, while experience ones will walk out through the back door (Pritchard, 2007: 140). Holland et al. (2007: 248) explained that employees who have skills that are in demand will look for employability not employment and will want to change jobs often. These types of employees are career focused, potentially highly mobile and are attracted by large rewards, whilst merely seeking self-development. Organisations should identify staff with scarce specialized skills and try to retain them. They should have effective retention strategies to retain those that have gained new knowledge and skills. Successful retention programmes incorporate training and development in an effort to retain their employees (Pritchard, 2007: 140). Any organisation that develops employees will want to retain staff and utilised their skills. It is important that key staff members, who are developed, are also retained. A retention strategy such as job enlargement could be offered, which refers to adding challenging or new responsibilities to an employee's current job (Noe et al., 2006: 398).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: SAMPLE AND RESEARCH PROCESS

The purpose of the research was to find out whether there are retention strategies in place to retain staff and to find out the motivating factors for resigning from ex-staff members that were employed at the PoN. The enquiry adopted a case study approach because it dealt with a specific institution in Namibia. A triangulation method was utilised to seek information from academics, administrative and support staff. A total of 230 questionnaires were distributed to staff members. A pilot exercise was conducted on three people including PoN staff members before distributing it to a large population. Face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted with top management which included the Vice Rector, Human Resource Manager and the Registrar and ex-staff members that had resigned from the institution upon completing their quailfications through staff development programmes, of the eight (8), three (3) staff members were sent abroad on a staff development programme. The aim of interviewing ex-staff members was to address reasons why they left the institution and to make recommendations in order to retain staff members that are sent to attend development programmes. The purpose for interviewing top management was to find out whether there are retention strategies and what procedures are in place to retain those that have obtained a higher degree qualification. The interviews took approximately 20 min. The targeted population included 511 of which 252 using probability sampling was selected. Those selected in the sample size were Namibians, permanent resident holders and staff members who resigned from the institution between 2006 and 2007, because they were in a better position to answer the questions posed and they would give an objective response. Institutional documents were also reviewed to corroborate empirical data that was collected. The Affirmative Action (AA) report was reviewed to ascertain how many staff members were sent on development programmes and how many resigned after obtaining a qualification. Ethical consideration was also taken into cognisance when collecting and

Table 1. Reward system for retention.

		Frequency	(%)	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Strongly agree	6	4.6	4.8	4.8
	Agree	17	13.1	13.6	18.4
	Disagree	48	36.9	38.4	56.8
	Strongly disagree	54	41.5	43.2	100.0
	Total	125	96.2	100.0	
Missing	System	5	3.8		
	Total	130	100.0		

(n=130).

Table 2. Institutional climate.

		Frequency	(%)	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Strongly agree	11	8.5	8.8	8.8
	Agree	40	30.8	32.0	40.8
	Disagree	40	30.8	32.0	72.8
	Strongly disagree	34	26.2	27.2	100.0
	Total	125	96.2	100.0	
Missing	System	5	3.8		
	Total	130	100.0		

(n=130).

analysing the data. Ex-staff members in the interview process were guaranteed anonymity, whilst confidentiality of information was also guaranteed.

Data analysis

In order to ascertain what reward and retention strategies that are in place, the researcher posed questions and statement. The researcher has also made an earnest effort in finding out the reasons that led to staff decision to resign from the institution after obtaining their qualifications. The following responses were received from the closed ended questionnaire distributed.

4.5.2.5 Reward systems

The rationale for this information was to measure if the institution has good reward systems to retain staff that they have sent on training and development programmes. The table below illustrated how respondents respond to this question.

Results in Table 1 reflect that 4.6% of respondents strongly agreed and 13.1% agreed, which totals 17.7% (4.6% plus 13.1%), however, 36.9% of respondents disagreed and 41.5% strongly disagreed, which totals 78.4% (36.9% plus 41.5%) who believe that the institution has good reward systems in place for staff retention.

Institutional climate enables staff to apply new knowledge

The rationale for this information was to assess if the institution's climate stimulates an environment where staff can apply new knowledge and skills that are gained at training to their job. The statement that respondents had to respond to related to the organisational climate of the institution in terms of whether it encouraged implementation of new ideas that were acquired during training.

Table 2 illustrates that from the sample population, 8.5% strongly agreed, and 30.8% agreed, which gives a total of 39.3% (8.5% plus 30.8%), while 30.8% of respondents disagreed and 26.2% strongly disagreed, which gives a total of 57% (30.8% plus 26.2%) who believe that institutional climate enables staff to apply their new knowledge, which was gained from training. A total of 3.8% of respondents chose not to respond to the statement. During the interview with ex-staff members, job content and financial rewards were cited as major reasons for resigning from the PoN. Administrative staff felt that they were not given opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills, which they gained at development programmes, to the job. The following response was received from the interviews conducted with top management:

What strategies are in place for retaining staff that attend development programmes?

One interviewee revealed that the PoN has good promotional opportunities for staff members that attend developmental programmes, while is up to them to apply when an opportunity arises. He further explained that there is also a staff development agreement that requires that staff work for the PoN for a number of years before the person can resign. Another interviewee noted that Namibia has a skills shortage and staff members who have Masters

and PhD qualifications, are more in demand, which makes it difficult for the PoN to retain members of staff who leave for better opportunities. The PoN may not be able to compete financially with the private sector and some public companies. He further explained that when a member fulfils his or her contractual obligations, it is up to the individual to decide.

The following are responses from the interviews conducted with ex-staff members: The rationale for interviewing ex-staff members was to identify contributing factors that led to staff resigning from the institution. According to the available records from the 01 January 2001 to 31 March 2006, forty-six (46) staff members that had made use of the staff development programme, left the institution (Polytechnic of Namibia, 2006). Again during June 2006 to July 2008 (Polytechnic of Namibia, 2007), ten (10) staff members resigned. It was difficult to locate all members, as most of them relocated from Windhoek where the study was based and or changed their mobile numbers.

What was your reason for leaving the institution after obtaining a qualification?

They all noted that the job content, financial rewards and lack of career opportunities motivated them to leave. Main emphasis was on job content, which they would as: "It was not challenging". The notch increase, which is the financial reward that they received after obtaining their qualification, was not sufficient. Three (3) members stated that there were no career opportunities for them within the institution. Six (6) administrative members said that they were not given any opportunities to apply the skills and knowledge that they had gained on their jobs. One member obtained a qualification, which was not in line with her work, hence, she was not eligible for a notch increase. This was de-motivating. However, two (2) academic members noted that they were given opportunities to teach higher level courses.

Signing a staff development agreement

One of the interviewees explained that during 2006, the PoN introduced a staff development agreement, which stated that staff members were required to work for the institution in a full-time capacity for a minimum period of one year for each academic year completed. This was used as a strategy to retain staff members that are sent to attend developmental programmes. During the interview members raised concerns about signing the contract as one of the discouraging factors. All interviewees agreed that signing of the contract will not motivate them to stay with the institution. Two of the members had worked for the full period of the agreement, however, others breached the agreement and paid back the money. One member noted that other companies were willing to buy them out. Some members were of the opinion that they would rather "pay out of their pockets". All interviewees agreed that the PoN should introduce better mechanisms to retain qualified staff if they intended to become a university.

As part of their closing statements, ex-members noted that there should be succession planning, career paths and a staff development plan for staff members that are sent on development programmes. Six (6) members had worked for the PoN after completing their qualifications and they were not given opportunities to apply their skills and knowledge. They all noted that signing a contract does not guarantee that staff will remain with the institution.

Overall impressions from staff members are that they enjoyed working for the PoN. All members stated that they would recommend someone to work for the institution. They stated that the institution does not give sufficient attention to staff development, even though it is in the process of transforming into a university. Staff members are sent on development programmes without a plan in place in terms of what that person do except to boost the PoN profile.

Institutional documents reviewed

The rationale for reviewing the HEQC audit report was that it was the first time that an audit had been carried out at the PoN. The audit report focuses on PoN, as a whole. This document was reviewed to establish what the findings of the audit were and what recommendations were made. During 2006 the Higher Education Quality Committee conducted an audit at the PoN. It was recommended in the report that the PoN must take proactive steps to retain their staff.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The above analysis revealed that there are no retention strategies in place to retain staff members. Findings from the interviews with top management and ex-staff members' respondent that there are no retention strategies, however, staff members who obtain a vertical higher qualification, are eligible for a notch increase. This has been clearly stated in the HR Code under the section that deals with staff training and development. However, ex-staff members noted that the notch increase offered by the PoN was not sufficient. Literature that was reviewed states that money alone cannot be an effective motivator to retain employees, it can be used to retain specific employees for specific purpose (Dibble, 1999: 101). Ex-staff members revealed that only one academic was promoted after obtaining her qualification and she worked for the PoN for 4 years and six months before resigning, while, the other six remained in their old jobs, however, the two academic staff members were given an opportunity to lecture higher level courses. One academic ex-staff member explained that he had to apply for a promotion, but resigned because the process was too long. More than that, ex-staff members noted that singing an agreement would not make them stay with institution. The results shown in Table 2 indicate that 57% of respondents disagreed that the institutional climates enables staff to apply their new knowledge. Furthermore, job content and financial rewards were cited as major reasons for resigning from the PoN. However, PoN top management argued the fact that they received lesser subsidy from the government compared to other tertiary educational institutions therefore they cannot offer competitive salaries to retain staff members.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on limitations from the current study, the research proposed future research that would benefit the PoN. A study should be conducted to quantify the cost of recruitment and the cost of labour turnover over the last

five years. Where there is no hard evidence in terms of figures, institutions or companies do not see the direct cost that recruitment and labour turnover has on the balance sheet. Furthermore, an investigation should be conducted to assess the roles that supervisors and senior management plays in employee retention.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The realisation of the vision "to be a leading university of science and technology" is wholly dependent on the knowledge, skills and abilities of staff members that are employed. Potential staff will only be attracted to the PoN to obtain training and development and then resign once they have received certain qualifications. For PoN to be viewed as an employer of choice, it should retain its staff. However, the small subsidy that the PoN receives from government may be a constraint to effective retention strategies. As noted earlier, the study wanted to find out the reasons why people are resigning from the institution after obtaining their qualifications and to determine whether there are retentions strategies. Based on the findings, the current researcher made some relevant recommendations that would enable the PoN to create an organisational culture that encourages and promotes staff retention. The recommendations are outline below in the following text:

The institution should develop a proper innovative retention strategy

Qualified people are scarce assets in Namibia and PoN finds it challenging to attract qualified individuals. Therefore, they should make an effort in terms of developing a proper innovative retention strategy. The retention strategy should specifically focus on people who have potential and those who have obtained their Master's and Doctoral degrees through the institution's development programmes. Staff members are not as easily replaceable as was the case in the past. Institutions should, therefore, be prepared to make financial provisions in order to retain staff members. A distinct difference should be made between administrative, support and academic staff when developing a retention strategy.

More than that, the strategy should offer administrative members of staff who have obtained a higher quailfication an opportunity to apply their skills and knowledge. For academic staff members, the retention strategy should include: Personal and professional development; flexible working hours (for academic staff members); and extra time for research activities. For administrative staff members the retention strategy should include: Career development; challenging tasks; autonomy; and more responsibilities. Implementing an innovative retention strategy will motivate staff members and commit them towards improving their qualifications, whilst encouraging them to share their newly gained knowledge with other staff members. Furthermore, retaining qualified staff will also lead to effective succession planning, which will attract potential employees. This recommendation might reduce the feeling that the institution does not have good retention strategies, and will also minimise staff turnover levels. There is an urgent need to make an effort for brain gain, rather than brain drain.

Government should extend additional funding to institutions on an equity basis

Finally, there is a need for the government to equally extend funding to the two tertiary educational institutions in Namibia. Currently, as stated earlier, the other institution receives more funding from the government, the PoN does even, though they both offer higher educational qualifications. Additional funding should also be used to increase salaries that are offered by the PoN. Currently, most staff members resign because of low salaries that are offered by the institution. The PoN will then be able to offer better fringe benefits to their staff members. This might prompt staff members to resign from the PoN and to work for UNAM or other private companies that could offer them such benefits. Furthermore, with more money, PoN can also identify head hunt qualified people and attract professors and associate professors from other countries in order to share their knowledge and expertise with the Namibians. For the national growth of the country, the government is, therefore, urged to equally distribute their funding. This will also promote a reduction in labour turnover rates, whilst increase international student enrolment numbers and the ranking of the institutions. The researcher believes that when the above recommendations are considered and implemented, the staff members will remain with the institution for a longer period and thus make PoN an international recognised institution with a positive workforce that strive for effective service delivery.

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