Exploring Factors Affecting the Attraction and Retention of Academic Employees at the Durban University of Technology

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the study was to explore the factors affecting the attraction of academic employees. It assessed the factors influencing their retention at the Durban University of Technology. This was a qualitative study conducted among 12 academics who were purposefully selected. The study found that the university was not doing enough to attract academic talent as job offers appeared to be the dominant reason for employees entering the employ of the institution. The study also found training and mentorship, flexible working hours, information, equipment and resources, job satisfaction, and challenging jobs to be the factors affecting the retention of academic personnel at the institution. Therefore, management should develop effective employee attraction and retention strategies by improving the benefit and remuneration system, culture, and working environment.

KEYWORDS

Attraction, Equipment and Resources, Flexible Working Hours, Higher Education, Mentorship, Recruitment, Retention

INTRODUCTION

Employees are an integral part of any organisation. An academic employee serves higher education institutions providing services that are vital to academic institutions' existence. Studies have shown that the demand for academic employees in higher education and training institutions has been on the rise and is likely to continue to increase. This is especially true now that the South African government has decided to increase significantly its contributions to higher education, leading to the conclusion of the plan to establish two more universities in the country (Samuel and Chipunza 2013). Researchers raise concerns about the prospects for a sufficient supply of academicians in South Africa (Mubarak and Khan 2012; Netswara, Rankhumise and Mavundla 2005).

The success of any organisation depends on having the right number of employees, with the right skills and abilities. Globally, well-performing organizations have excellent working condition that produce highly motivated employees to attain success. If employees are motivated then they work towards improving the conditions within the workplaces. Workforce motivation can be obtained through satisfactory salary, job design, and internal communication (Galli 2020). Academic employees acquire specific expertise that is costly and difficult to replace. Therefore, attracting, motivating, and retaining knowledgeable employees is important in a knowledge-based and tight labour market, in

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which changing knowledge management practices and global convergence of technology has redefined the nature of work (Samuel and Chipunza 2013).

Higher education institutions are forced to look after their valued academic staff. Consequently, having an effective attraction and retention strategy is essential for such institutions' existence, over and above its obvious desirability. In order to retain knowledgeable workers, organisations must ensure that they pay close attention to the individual development needs of each person (Bagraim, Cunningham, Potgieter and Viedge 2007). Previous research has reported compensation, training and development opportunities, supervisor support, and career opportunities as important retention factors, especially in the context of higher education (Deas 2017).

Problem Statement

Retaining academicians is a major problem for higher education institutions globally as well as in South Africa which are constantly on the lookout for new and innovative ways of retaining knowledge workers. Skills shortage has been thought to be at the root of many challenges that the country is facing, including poverty, uneven development, and unemployment. Labour experts have attributed South Africa's skills shortage to the emigration of highly skilled workers, immigration restrictions that affect highly skilled foreigners, and a dysfunctional education system (Business Tech 2014). Emigration of highly skilled employees has likewise posed a challenge in the education sector. These challenges are, in part, linked to organisations' ability to attract, develop, and retain their employees. There seem to be difficulties in higher education institutions in pooling the right talents that can impel these institutions to greater heights. This challenge is more pronounced in universities of technology (UOTs), making it difficult for UOTs to remain as competitive as the historical or traditional universities. Highly educated academicians leave the country to pursue careers elsewhere in the world. Global businesses are experiencing a shortage in the supply of talent, and there has been a rapid growth in its demand. The gap is said to be a challenge to every employer in the world. Kapoor and Sherif (2012) noted that only those organisations willing to adapt their human resources practices to the changing global labour market conditions will be able to attract and retain high-performing employees. Shortage of talent is seen to be a problem not only in developing countries, but worldwide. It has been observed in all industries, with education being no exception. The imminent ageing and retirement of the baby boomer generation poses a challenge to the global labour force. It has been reported that more workers are retiring at a rate that is faster than the time taken to replace their skills and expertise.

As the opportunities have risen globally to attract top talents from emerging countries, our South African higher education institutions seem to be losing their highly skilled professionals to the private sector and foreign countries. Very few studies in South Africa explored the reasons why the academicians leave an organisation. Therefore, the objective of this study was to explore the factors affecting the attraction and retention of academic staff at the Durban University of Technology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To enhance organisational performance, effective use of human resources are of paramount importance. Some companies now recognize the growing importance of human resources, but few conceptualize them in strategic terms. Therefore, many companies take the opportunity to seize competitive advantage through the initiative of strategic human resource management practices (Anjum, Ming and Puig 2019).

Attraction and Retention of Talented Employees

Over the years, the global economy has become increasingly knowledge-ambitious, with human intellectual capital now more than ever a resource that affords organisations a competitive advantage (Takawira, Coetzee, and Schreuder 2014). The retention of productive and qualified employees is valuable to any institution, contributing to its endurance. Key, qualified and productive employees on the staff are the heart of the organisation.

When employees are motivated, they also work towards improving the conditions within the workplaces. In addition, pay satisfaction, job design, and internal communication of an organization contributes to its workforce motivation, which results in improved productivity and retention of employees for the organization (Galli 2020). Organisations failing to retain quality employees normally find themselves faced with a high turnover of staff. This is not only costly; it proves disadvantageous to an institution's survival, growth and prosperity (Masango and Mpofu 2013). Nel, Kirsten, Swanepoel, Erasmus and Poisat (2012) highlighted that many factors play a role in staff retention, but one central aspect relates to getting the match right and goes beyond the match between the competency profile and the job requirements.

High-achieving faculties in universities are a critical driver of institutional performance. An institution's ability to attract, develop and retain talented faculty staff is a major competitive advantage. Human capital gives existence and prominence to universities: it is because of such excellent faculty members that they thrive. Dube and Ngulube (2013) highlighted that we cannot deny the importance of the right skill levels, unique capabilities, knowledge and experience of academic staff, which can only be acquired over time. Dube and Ngulube (2013) further emphasized the challenge wherein experienced academicians will be exiting the system without an equivalent entry rate by young researchers. This discrepancy creates a void or imbalance in scholarly and academic productivity and growth.

Factors Affecting Retention of Academic Employees

Nel et al. (2012) defined retention as the efforts of an organisation to retain the services of an employee by various means, such as better-than-average remuneration, support for quality of work or life programmes, benefits that may be extended to family, and positions linked to recognition and status. Masango and Mpofu (2013) defined employee retention as a deliberate action undertaken by an employer to retain current employees in an institution. They further postulated that it is a systematic attempt by employers to construct and promote an environment that encourages current employees to continue being in employment.

Job Satisfaction and Job Flexibility

Job satisfaction is said to be a very important element valued by employees, which organisations and institutions of higher learning should not ignore. Job satisfaction is particularly important to academic employees, with teaching and learning being their core business.

Fulfilling the job satisfaction requirements of academic employees at large is important considering the contributions they make both to society and to the students they educate, together with the institution they work for. A person with no job satisfaction may complain of many factors, such as actual working conditions, tools used in work, insufficient benefits offered by the employer, and lack of appreciation and social prestige (Çolakoğlu, and Atabay 2014). Job satisfaction may be linked to performance, organisational productivity, and other issues, including staff turnover (Toker 2009).

Job flexibility is essential to retaining quality employees of all ages (Boomer Authority 2009). Researchers describe the importance of employment flexibility, such as scheduling variations that better accommodate individual work times, workloads, responsibilities and family commitments (Pleffer 2007). Studies show that flexibility empowers individuals to facilitate a healthier balance between work and personal obligations, something that appeals to all employees of all ages (Scheef and Thielfoldt 2004).

Training and Development

A serious challenge that universities face is the ageing of its academic workforce. This contributes significantly to the academic and research output of universities. Another deciding factor in relation to retention is the extent to which the employing organisation provides opportunities for personal and professional growth (George 2015). Training is a key retention factor that affects employees of any

age. Staff development is part of an overall plan to develop skills in the country, and not only in the organisation (Lockhart and Majal 2012). According to Boomer Authority (2009), the access of all employees to training and development programmes is critical in facilitating organisational growth, particularly in performance and technological improvements. Professional training and development of academicians has been shown to be instrumental in a university's effectiveness and growth. In today's vibrant environment, training of academic employees is vital to improving their knowledge and skills and to provide them with the confidence to compete in their fields. Furthermore, academicians in higher education should be given maximum opportunities for career development so that they can enhance their qualifications and abilities so as to remain effective in the institution (Muhammad, Asad, Usama, and Affan, 2016). A recent South African study found that career development concerns act as a moderating variable in the relationship between psychological contract perceptions and satisfaction with training and development opportunities as retention practice (Deas and Coetzee 2020).

Employee Motivation

Over the years, managers have tried to elicit commitment from staff to carry out their organisation's strategic plans by motivating people and rewarding them for good performance. Therefore, every manager should ensure that there is control mechanism and treatment of human resources are available to work positively for the organisation (Galli 2018). While financial incentives are the core component of most company's reward systems, especially in the private sector, this is not easily attainable in the public service. Therefore, managers in the public service are tasked with ensuring that employees are kept motivated and are able to deliver a quality service, despite the often disenchanting work environments. Muhammad et al. (2016) stated that an academic employee's job needs to be properly designed. A heavy workload for academicians may lead to demotivation. There should be a learning environment for all academicians in higher education institutions (HEIs) and administrators should strive to treat their academic employees with respect and without discriminatory practices.

Work Environment

According to Netswera et al. (2005), flexible working hours, a sense of purpose, a challenging job and minimal grievances between management and employees provide a favourable work environment. Nel et al. (2012) made the point that the key to retaining the best employees very often lies in the relationship employees have with their immediate supervisors or managers; and that time and resources should be spent on training managers in enhancing their relationships with their subordinates. Advancing supervisor/employee relationships should be viewed as a constant process rather than a once-off event. According to George (2015), an environment conducive to employee retention is one where the working experience is a pleasant one, the resources are adequate and there is some degree of flexibility. Consequently, the key features of an environment conducive to job satisfaction would appear to be the availability of sufficient resources to perform the job, flexibility and that it is a pleasant or fun place to work.

Employee assistance programmes are said to be another factor that influences organisations' working environments and employees' intentions to remain in an organisation. Such programmes include flexible work hours and special leave, such as maternity leave, adoption leave, extended leave and personal leave. Du Plooy and Snyman (2003) concluded that retention is as important as recruitment. Retention may be accomplished by promoting the work environment at universities of technology (UT) through consistently reinforcing scholarship and welcoming all members of the community (Du Plooy and Snyman, 2003).

Recognition and Reward Systems

The academic programme is said to be the imperative function of any higher education institution. It is therefore important that academic personnel are given the recognition they deserve and are rewarded for the effort they put into ensuring the smooth operation of the institution. Adapting traditional reward

systems to focus on employee preferences has become a necessity, as companies strive to attract, motivate and retain a skilled and high-performing workforce. Employee rewards have thus become an important topic in today's economy. Companies strive to find a balance between reward components, as well as identifying those components that provide for employees' personal needs (Snelgar, Renard, and Venter, 2013). Snelgar et al. (2013) pointed out that as competition in the workplace increases, employees tend to become more demanding when it comes to rewards, expecting organisations to make exceptions based on their individual performances. Managers must introduce procedures for relating rewards more explicitly to effort or performance: appreciation must be shown by recognising employees' performance.

Tetty (2006) recommended that African universities should take the initiative in addressing some of the problems identified and that are within their ability to be solved. These challenges include decentralising authority, promoting communication among different groups, fostering transparency in decision making, and rewarding excellence. Tetty (2006) further stated that universities also have the responsibility of ensuring that their academic integrity is not compromised by pressures to increase enrolments for political reasons or commodifying knowledge solely for pecuniary gain. A study from Morocco reported that universities should use new technologies as communication management devices and they must adopt a culture of social responsibility like private companies (Hissi, Benjoud, Haqiq Idrissi 2018),

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Sekaran and Bougie (2013) asserted that research design is the blueprint for the collection, measurement and analysis of data. The research design is based on the study's research question. This study used a qualitative approach in order to explore the factors affecting the attraction and retention of academic employees at the Durban University of Technology.

The study was conducted at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Because the study focused on the attraction and retention of academic staff at DUT, participation was restricted to members of the academic staff at this institution. Participation ranged from junior lecturers to professors.

Data-Collection Strategies

Since the study was qualitative in nature, a sample of 12 academicians were purposefully selected for data saturation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among the participants whose employment status as academic personnel made them eligible and sufficiently knowledgeable to be study participants. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were offered in a conversational manner to make them as natural as possible. The intention was to put respondents at ease as they talked about their own perceptions and experiences, expressing their views. Each interview was recorded using a tape recorder. The scheduling of interviews was arranged around times chosen by the participants' so that interviews did not hamper their normal duties. Each interview took about 40 minutes.

An interview guide, which was prepared beforehand, included a list of questions or issues that were to be explored. The guide helped the interviewer pace the interviews and to make the interviews more systematic and comprehensive. The questions asked where to elaborate on their experiences of joining the institution and reasons for this. Also asked to explain if they would stay with the institution for explain the reasons for this. Lastly, we asked what will make them leave the institution and recommendation for institution to the institutions do not lose their employees.

Analysis of Data

The data analysis of the qualitative semi-structured interviews was thematic. The analysis was conducted per individual case. The comparisons between the cases were made, based on the themes derived from the individual cases. In analysing the data, coding was used with the aim of grouping and summarizing the data. At first, line-by-line and event-by-event coding, resulting in key themes were identified, then cross-case theme comparisons were made followed by identification of key themes per participant, and finally summary of key themes across all cases by event were made. It identified current and emergent negative factors and possible positive factors that affected the attraction and retention of academic personnel at the institution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Employee Attraction

Interviewees were asked what influenced their decisions to become a member of staff at the institution. This question was asked primarily to assess interviewees' true intentions for pursuing a career in academia at DUT. Four themes emerged from interviewees' responses. Staff indicated that they had joined the institution because they were either offered a position at the institution; were at the institution by default as a result of the merger between the former Technikon Natal and ML Sultan Technikon; because of the benefits offered by the institution; or because of their love of academia. Job offers was the main reasons for them to take up the offer in the institution.

Among the motivations given by interviewees for joining DUT's academic staff was that, prior to being employed by the institution, they were either unemployed or were employed on contract at a different institution, or their employment contract had expired at such an institution. Participant A, for instance, said:

I was working at [another academic institution] before I came here and my contract had expired. So, I had never thought that I would come here to this institute until I got the job description and decided to apply for it.

Closely linked to this motivation was the attraction to the institution because of the benefits that it offered. This was mentioned by one of the interviewees as their sole reason for joining the institution. This interviewee, Participant B, described her progression and motivation for joining the academic staff of DUT as:

I was a student in the course I am working in. I was interested in starting a career as either a teacher or a lecturer. I pursued the academic route, did [my] honours, and found that there was an opening and applied. My main interest in working here was because of the balance between the theory and the practice.

However, it cannot be concluded that the other interviewees had no passion for academia at all. Instead, it is plausible that the passion for academia was a given, hence they concentrated on responding as to how the DUT became their employer of choice.

When asked the question: "What do you like best about the institution?" two themes emerged from their responses. One of the interviewees, Participant C, put it as follows:

I don't think there is a preference. It's just an institution like any other. There is nothing that puts it out there and makes it stand alone.

It also emerged from the responses of the other participants that what they really liked about the institution was that it was progressive and focused on staff and students. Employees found the institution to be evolving. This encouraged them as this self-discovery created room for creativity and innovativeness. The university was also implementing projects to enhance student learning. Participant D encapsulates this best in saying:

I think that it is an exciting time, and because we are continually evolving there is a lot of creative space. There is a lot of opportunity to bring in new ideas, and I am speaking of my faculty and my department, like with e-learning. Sometimes you hear of institutions that are very rigid in how they do stuff and they are not willing to think about innovative ways. In our institution, I like that academicians are given that ability or that space to think out of the box.

The study found that the institution was not doing enough in ensuring that it attracted the academic talent it requires as the majority of respondents when asked what attracted them to the institution said they had responded to job offers. This shows that these employees could leave the institution at any time if they were to get job offers anywhere else.

The institution was acknowledged by employees as giving recognition of work done by employees. Respondents also mentioned benefits and remuneration; recognition and appreciation; staff support; staff development; career progression opportunities; better resources and facilities as factors they perceived as critical in attracting academic talent.

The above findings are in line with other studies conducted elsewhere. For example, a recent study has reported on how employee benefits are valued per job level, age group, and generation (Mercer 2019). Thus, organizations have begun using personas to identify which aspects are most significant to target populations and to operationalize their total rewards programs for distinct groups (Hermans 2020). Another study conducted among SMEs in Pakistan found that internal career opportunities has positive weak significant relationship and positive impact on service behaviour whereas Employment security and profit sharing had non-significant relationships with service behaviour (Anjum, Ming, and Puig 2019).

The present study uncovered that female employees felt that they were treated differently compared to their male counterparts and their needs differed from those of male counterparts. This disparity is supported in the literature, where, for example, Cassim (2005) noted that gender equity in higher education is increasingly becoming the subject of attention and research globally as well as in South Africa, particularly since the promulgation of the Employment Equity Act. An Indian study suggested that market value and social value as the factors determining the employee attraction (Ahmad, Khan, and Haque 2019)

Employee Retention

Two broad themes emerged as motivators that kept employees at the institution. Employees valued the need to be recognised and appreciated for their accomplishments. The work environment, which included growth opportunities and creative freedom, was also among the motivators for remaining in the employ of the institution.

Recognition and Appreciation

Interviewees indicated that they valued being appreciated and recognised for their contributions and accomplishments. In one instance this was attributed to great leadership from their superiors. Participant B for example said:

In my department we have an HOD or manager that really appreciates who we are, our ideas. And while we are planning to expand our course, in terms of our qualifications, we [are] wanting to

introduce an advanced diploma, a postgraduate diploma, and then a Masters. In doing that we are really being asked for our input where developing the modules for that. The one thing that I would love to see is that eventually these modules being realised and then teaching them.

Two interviewees felt that there was no concrete reason for remaining at the institution. Employment at the institution was primarily needs based. In the words of Participant E:

I am not too sure whether I want to stay with it. The sole purpose of me being here is to work and provide. If I get something else somewhere else, I'm gone. It's not the passion because that does not pay the bills. If I get an offer somewhere else which is far better than I will most probably leave.

Work Environment, Flexibility and Students

The work environment at the institution was cited as being a very pleasant and conducive to providing career advancement opportunities for staff members who had the ambition to pursue such advancement. Participant F mentioned this in her response saying:

There are a lot of opportunities to move up in the institution. It is also a very pleasant environment to work in.

The environment was also described as not a very restrictive one. It allowed for academicians to work at their own pace, provided that they met desired outcomes on time. The flexible working hours also made it convenient for staff members to tend to their family responsibilities, for example, fetching their children from school. Consequently, staff members felt that the institution was very supportive in this regard and that this support was not gender specific. Participant J, for instance, highlighted this in her response saying:

The flexibility of working hours. I have kids and when I have to fetch them, I am allowed to work from home, so long as my work is done. I think that the flexibility is very important. I see that support for males and females who have kids and similar responsibilities as well.

The work environment also gave academicians the freedom to be creative in the methods that they used to teach students. The passion to help students and mould young minds was also given by one of the interviewees as the main motivator for remaining at the institution.

Researcher reported that in recent past workers look for incentive policies and benefits that make them to be happier, and just not the salary. This means societies are increasingly concerned about work–life balance, personal well-being, and job satisfaction (Rodríguez-Sánchez, González-Torres, Montero-Navarro and Gallego-Losada 2020). A recent South African study conducted in a higher education institution found that the employee retention strategies that took into account dispositions of agency and retention practices satisfaction appear to prime employees for higher levels of organisational commitment (Gani, Potgieter and Coetzee 2020).

Participants were asked to indicate any potential reasons to leave the institution. There was a wide spectrum of responses to this question. Motivations for potentially leaving the institution included racism, better job offers, and career development. These were not necessarily an indication that employees were currently dissatisfied with conditions at the institution and were thus preparing to leave. Rather, the responses were in the “worst-case scenario” context. In other words, should the abovementioned “events” be realised, then academic staff would feel motivated to leave the institution.

The interviewees that indicated that DUT was their employer of choice said that they could not think of any possible reason that would make them leave the institution. A better job offer was tabled

by one interviewee as a possible motivation for leaving the institution. Deteriorating health and safety concerns were also raised as motivators for leaving the institution. One interviewee, Participant B, felt that academic mobility was paramount to remaining at the institution. Respondents felt that, currently, sabbatical leave was non-existent at the institution and they also expressed their desire to experience work cultures in other institutions. In Participant B's words,

I feel like that at UOTs we don't have sabbaticals and we often teaching long hours and you are provided a nice amount of leave, which is not necessarily the same as a sabbatical. I feel like if we do not have more mobility, even the option of teaching overseas for three months, like an exchange program. I personally feel that if I do not have more mobility and I am not able to find a balance between being an academic here and doing personal projects that relate to my field, what kind of lecturer am I going to become, if all I am doing is working from books and not my own experiences. If that does not happen for me, it might affect my chances of staying here.

An unstable work environment was considered a significant reason for leaving by three interviewees. This extended to internal conflict between departments, sexism, and racism. Discriminatory practices were raised by Participant D as a possible reason for her to leave the institution. In her words,

I have been hearing instances of discrimination and unfair work practices. I think that if more of these crop up and as I am also growing as an academic it may result in my leaving if I feel that there is no growth opportunity for me based on my gender or my race, etc. That would be the only reason why I would leave.

Participant I also echoed similar sentiments in saying:

Racism is at the top of my list. I also feel that as women we are not taken seriously whenever we say anything.... We are always creeping behind the men.

The above findings are in line with studies conducted by Snelgar et al. (2013) who pointed out that not having rewards facility make employee to leave the organisation. A recent South African study reported that training and development had direct effects on thriving, while low autonomy satisfaction and inadequate training and development had direct effects on intention to leave (Mahomed, and Rothmann 2020). Another study conducted among students reported the interconnections between overconfidence, illusion of control, risk perception and the decision to start a venture (Zaiane, and Moussa 2018). A Ghanaian study conducted in the Telecoms Sector found a significant positive relationship between service recovery based on firm's understanding of firm's fair treatment of customer complaints, customer complaints, and customer satisfaction (.

CONCLUSION

In exploring the factors that affected staff attraction, safe working conditions were highlighted as important to the survey respondents. The organisation's reputation seemed to have an impact on the way that employees viewed the attractiveness of organisations. Remuneration and benefits were not seen as primary factors influencing participants' attraction to the institution. The majority of them were attracted to the institution primarily because of the job offer that they received from it, and what they liked most about the institution was that it was progressive and focused on staff and students. Flexible working hours featured as one of the most important retention factors by participants. Training and mentoring were also identified as important factors affecting staff retention at the institution.

The current rewards, incentives and benefits that the institution offered to employees did not appear to be sufficient to motivate employees to remain at the institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study sought to identify factors that academic employees at DUT felt were important in attracting and retaining academic employees. Identified factors were intended to be of benefit to academic employees, human resources and senior management at DUT. The following recommendations are thus proposed:

For the university to be able to attract and retain academic talent it should offer benefits, rewards and remuneration that are sure to make them the employer of choice. Research should be conducted by the university to determine what others in the industry are offering and adjustments should be made accordingly.

The university should proactively improve the academic employee's working environment by organising work in ways that promote health and decrease all adverse health-related issues. This will help improve the productivity and performance of employees, improve employee morale and staff retention, thus reducing absenteeism and costs related to ill health. Improving academic employees' working environment will enhance the university's reputation and reduce the costs of having to recruit and train new people.

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