

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT MATTERS: RETAINING THE SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE YOU NEED AND WANT

Janet Miller examines the importance of staff retention as the third of three related articles from the Voluntary Sector Social Services Workforce Unit.

When staff feel valued and supported they are more easily retained.....

(ADSW 2005)

Retaining means keeping, holding onto, not losing or letting go. When it comes to your workforce, why does this matter so much? Is it a 'good thing'? And if it is, how do you go about ensuring that you are achieving it in the best possible way. This paper begins to consider these issues as the third in a series of articles, leading up to the Voluntary Sector Social Services Workforce Unit's first conference, 'Workforce Development Matters', to be held at Stirling Management Centre on 8th November 2007. Retention of staff is one element in ensuring that the sector has the right people in the right place at the right time, people who are competent and confident in performing their roles and who are motivated to stay with their organisations to provide the best possible service to service users and carers. It should be built into the workforce planning process alongside strategies for recruitment, workforce development and registration.

Retention is reflected in staff turnover rates. In voluntary sector social services these are generally in the range of 4 – 40% per annum, with an average rate for Scotland's Social Service sector of approximately 18% (Future Skills Scotland 2005). A 'good' rate of retention is one that achieves the best possible outcomes for the users of your service. Too little and the workforce may become too stagnant and complacent; too much and your organisation begins to look like one in which no-one wants to work. Let's look at this more closely. Why is retention important?

Why

Organisations that make an effort to keep their staff have workers who are more motivated, communicate better with one another and ultimately provide a better service to the service user. Retention also optimises the use of resources, since high staff turnover is a very costly business in terms of recruiting and developing new staff. There is a lot of evidence for this. The Gallup Q12 survey, produced as a result of hundreds of focus groups and interviews across many areas of employment and in several countries, found that lower staff turnover was associated with higher growth, better productivity, better customer loyalty and other manifestations of superior performance.

In terms of resource use, adding up the approximate minimum cost of losing a member of staff can help to show that investing in retention methods is money well spent. Consider the costs of:

- Administration
- Advertising
- Recruitment and Selection
- Covering a post
- Induction and training for the a new employee

The other side of the coin is the consequence of not making an effort to retain staff: low morale, poor performance, poor reputation and a vicious circle resulting in recruitment problems and eventually an inability to compete with organisations that have invested in their staff and their service. The Workforce Unit has commissioned research into 'Recruitment and Retention lessons for social services in Scotland'. A workshop presenting the results of this research will be held at the Unit's November Conference.

How

Having established the validity of staff retention, how can you get this right? This will be discussed under the following headings:

- Communication and Information
- Providing positive work opportunities and experiences
- Management and leadership
- Supervision
- Learning, development and promoting a learning culture

RETAIN YOUR STAFF

If we can give attention to these areas in our organisations, it is more likely that we shall be able to retain staff. Here are the reasons.

Communication and Information

What we want is less information and more communication.

(Care worker quoted in ADSW 2005)

Communication, communication, communication this is the first building block to retaining staff. With good, clear, well-focussed communication you can establish clearly that staff understand what is expected of them and enable them to contribute to discussions about this, you can praise people and help them to develop, you can express opinions and acknowledge those of others, you can chat formally and informally to build relationships that are empowering and helpful. Without communication you have only assumptions and misunderstandings. Of course, a lot depends on what is communicated and how it is done. Here are some examples from the voluntary sector:

- staff were involved in discussions about how an organisation could be restructured to improve their service
- lunches were organised once a month away from the workplace to give staff an opportunity to meet with management and service users informally
- an annual staff conference gave staff the opportunity for professional discussion and gaining new perspectives

And the following points have been adapted from the 'Improving Front Line Services' document (ADSW 2005):

- try tracking information through your organisation to see where it gets to and what is conveyed to whom – then improve on it
- use different ways of communication; speech is powerful but sometimes communicating in a group can be more powerful than communicating one to one; be creative
- share information, don't sit on it, and distinguish between what is important and what should just be noted
- communication isn't one way; everyone has a responsibility to communicate, so work to create a culture of communication

Providing positive work opportunities and experiences

The Mercer 'What's Working' survey (2004) provided evidence that people want jobs that are satisfying, that provide positive work opportunities and experiences. Here are the things that were regarded as the most important in determining staff commitment and motivation and whether staff stayed with their organisation:

- Being treated with respect (85%)
- Work / Life balance (79%)
- Providing good service to others (74%)
- Quality of work colleagues (74%)
- Type of work (73%)

Only 65% mentioned pay. Flexibility was important to 70% of women but only 54% of men. CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) in its 2007 survey indicated the importance of learning and development opportunities and positive line management in retaining staff. All of these points have great significance for voluntary sector social services and indicate some of the inherent advantages possessed by the sector if they are recognised and used to good effect. They will be further explored in workshops at the Unit's conference, for example in relation to retaining migrant workers.

Management and Leadership

Management and leadership go hand in hand and contribute hugely to staff retention. A survey carried out by Community Care (2003) found that having a poor relationship with their manager was the top reason for people leaving a job (90%) whilst a good relationship was one of the top reasons for staying (79%). Good managers need to provide effective leadership. They need to take a 'helicopter view' (Heifetz 1994) of their work and organisation, they need to provide ways to involve and include staff in the functioning of teams, they need to provide co-ordination and 'holding the space' so that the workforce can flourish, take responsibility for their work and actions, but ensure that the support mechanisms are in place to enable them to do this. It is a difficult and complicated job, a constant balancing act, yet there is plenty of guidance out there to help. Managers who develop themselves can also facilitate the development of their workforce. They can develop through qualifications and training courses, conferences and talking to one another, through giving and receiving mentoring and supervision. The Supporting Frontline Staff Initiative (ADSW 2005) identified what people want most from their manager:

- Availability
- Willingness to listen
- Doing what they say they will do
- Responding in good time
- Making decisions and not procrastinating
- Telling it like it is, above and below
- Being an advocate for the team
- Recognising their potential
- Trusting them to do a good job but not abandoning them to their own devices

Supervision

Time away from the job to discuss and reflect upon the content of your work and the way you do things provides the opportunity to improve and feel valued. If you are to keep staff, everyone needs this opportunity regularly and reliably. Supervision formally provided by the organisation provides such an opportunity. One to one supervision within organisations should be built into the process of performance development so that individuals are enabled, in a non-threatening, supportive and facilitative way, to assess their own performance, discuss issues, identify and tackle areas for development, and receive feedback, including due praise.

Developing and promoting learning and a learning culture

There is a risk that those you develop move on. A much greater risk is that those you do not develop, stay.

(Judith Leary-Joyce)

Last, but certainly not least, is the development and promotion of learning and a learning culture, a culture in which workers not only wish to gain the qualifications appropriate to their job, but want to go on learning and developing in order to make the most of their potential to provide the best possible service. Studies show that lack of learning and development or career opportunities is one of the most common reasons why people leave a job (CIPD 2007). Valuing and investing in learning and a learning culture is therefore a good way of improving retention rates within your organisation. SCIE (2005) has developed a useful checklist to enable organisations to promote this culture. It is too long to include in full, but here are some of the things that contribute to such a culture:

- Service users and carers are involved in staff learning and development (this will be explored further in a workshop at our November conference)
- Team working, learning, and making the best use of all staff skills are integral to the organisation
- The development of new ideas and methods is encouraged
- An open learning environment allows learning from mistakes and the opportunity to test out innovative practice

- Messages from research and new evidence are thought about and incorporated into practice
- There is continuous development for all staff including a clear supervision and appraisal policy
- Leadership at all levels embodies and models the key principles of a learning organisation

And finally

Try the Gallup Q12 questionnaire, produced as a result of hundreds of focus groups and interviews, described in the best seller 'First Break all the Rules'. In 12 short questions it provides organisations and individuals with an indication of where they are and what needs to be done to improve retention of staff.

Score 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for each question. High scores indicate positive outcomes. Organisations are encouraged to work on the two worst and two best scores, the worst so that problem areas can be tackled, and the best because success breeds success.

- Do you know what is expected of you at work?
- Do you have the materials and equipment you need to do your work right?
- At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?
- In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?
- Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?
- Is there someone at work who encourages your development?
- At work, do your opinions seem to count?
- Does the mission / purpose of your company make you feel your job is important?
- Are your associates (fellow employees) committed to doing quality work?
- Do you have a best friend at work?
- In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?
- In the last year, have you had opportunities to learn and grow?

Most of the things you can do to retain staff aren't rocket science, don't require additional resources and are mostly about small shifts rather than large revolutions. They may require gradual behavioural and cultural change, led through and participated in by everyone in the organisation, and they need to ensure that staff are working in conditions that not only enable them to answer the Gallup Q12 questions positively but also to improve on their scores by this time next year.

The Workforce Unit conference will showcase current thinking about retaining your workforce and will give you the opportunity to contribute: **Your Workforce Matters.**

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