Talent acquisition and retention

Finding and keeping talented teachers is a real challenge, says MARK HANSON.

IN the current educational climate, transparency and accountability are high on the agenda. This, in turn, fuels a need for accountability of staff within schools. Often this allows those at the top of a school system, namely principals and leadership teams, to accurately assess the performance or underperformance of individual teachers.

The ‘opening’ of classroom doors brings with it a realisation that talent management is fast becoming a priority, locally and globally. It is now the responsibility of Australian schools to manage their ‘talent pools’ in order to develop and attract the future leaders of their school. Unfortunately, talent acquisition and retention is not a straightforward process. Finding and keeping good people is hard!

A recent study (Skilbeck & Connell, 2004) of Australian teacher retention rates showed that the ‘supply chain’ of one State estimates only 15% of those applying for educational courses will end up teaching several years later. Teacher retention alone seems to be an increasing issue, let alone the retention of those we consider to be ‘talented’. The changing profile of the teaching profession, coupled with globalisation, has attracted a new breed of teachers. Younger people are now more likely to change careers several times during their lifetime and look specifically for a work-life balance in their careers (Lonsdale and Ingvarson, 2003).

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The digital age promotes extrinsic motivation and satisfaction within a relatively quick time frame. These changes in societal needs bring with them complications for schools with regard to talent acquisition and retention. How do we ensure that our school is a place where people want to work and like it so much that they want to stay? What are we doing to meet the motivational needs of our future leaders and what are the needs of the people we are trying to attract? These questions should drive a talent management approach within schools.

When confronted with talent management, our thoughts often drift to those who, in our organisation, are high achievers. Those who are usually the ones taking credit for much of the work, the top performers. However, the people with ‘talent’ are not always those who we perceive as top performers, the ‘real talent’ may be sitting idle, patiently waiting for an opportunity to shine. Identifying high potential talent should come back to an individual’s capacity to learn and modify behaviours to suit new environments. In this respect, ‘talent’ is not an inherent individual quality but more something that can be grown and nurtured, given the right fit of circumstances and opportunities.

Organisations develop talent rather than individuals possessing it naturally. In most definitions of ‘talent’, one element is consistent - learning. This gives a strong indication as to the true reference of talent. In a sense, talented people are those who have maximised the available opportunities and experiences they have had. This could have been in their current working environment or in a previous workplace.

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Once we understand what ‘talent’ is, organisations can then ask how they attract talent and what can be done to develop and maintain talented professionals. Story (2002) lists the following guides to attracting and keeping talent.

- Know your people, what drives them and their career aspirations.
- Develop the right culture, and communicate it well.
- Establish a monetary and non-monetary reward system.
- Ensure people are continually challenged and learning.
- Ensure talented people have a clear path to career progression.
- Include talented individuals in the improvement process.
• Make staff retention a core business function.
• Ensure that the company's corporate and career brands are well communicated at the recruitment stage.
• Ensure that line-managers deliver on promises.
• Transfer personal information gathered during the recruitment phase into the on-the-job role.
• Implement culture surveys and regular reviews to monitor satisfaction levels.
• Unleash the perimeters on how fast high flyers can progress their careers.
• Ensure that there's an alignment between individuals and the working relationship, the values and culture of your organisation.
• Spend more time developing the recruitment process.
• Spell out why talented people should work for you, but don't oversell.
• Remain an industry leader on a growth path.

(Story, 2002)

Real talent is developed

At the basis of Story's (2002) claims is the concept that real talent is developed and that professional learning is an essential part of acquiring talent. Motivation is also key to talent management, as are relationships. These claims highlight the importance for an organisation to carefully consider talent management in their strategic planning. It also highlights that talent acquisition can come from both external and internal sources, and that both are equally as important.

What does this mean in educational contexts, where human resource management is not a 'department' but is undertaken by various factions around the school, primarily by the principal? At the centre of all current research on this topic is the need for organisations to put into practice a talent management plan. This does not differ in educational contexts. Schools should be well aware of their future leadership requirements, knowing that our education system has undergone significant change in recent years and will most likely continue to do so. With this in mind, talent acquisition and retention then becomes a significant element in school planning and operation. Schools should be continually thinking about developing their future leaders and considering what motivates them to achieve and remain in their current employment. Ramsay (2002) suggests that respect, dignity, opportunities, challenge and enjoyment are high among the things that motivate individuals to stay working at the same place. A highly important and relevant factor that schools should be considering is staff morale. A key indicator of job satisfaction is staff morale and one that is mandatorily reported on in most Australian States. Schools can use their staff morale survey results to get a quick snapshot of their employees' job satisfaction. Although this may seem a relatively crude method to identify talent retention rates, the simple fact is that staff morale cannot be overlooked. Treating people as people, especially with regard to younger employees, seems to be of high importance when looking at what motivates someone to stay in the same employment. In fact, talent management is basically just that, putting individuals before organisational outcomes. Much pressure is being placed on Australian schools to collect and use performance data, yet this seems to oppose the current views towards talent management. We should question if performance increase is really worth it. Should we be aiming for results at all costs? Or is there something more important to the organisation in the long run? Schools can consider these factors in relation to their own situation. Some schools may require a drastic increase in performance and therefore this should be their main priority. However, others, who are achieving relatively high outcomes, should be contemplating the sustainability of any changes made, particularly with respect to talent management. After all, talent management will in turn lead to a secure future of the school's leadership.

Inspiring people is the key

As with good leadership, good talent management shows an understanding that inspiring people is the path to success. The people are what make an organisation great! The staff are the true assets of schools and it is them we should be focusing our attention on if we are to effectively attract and retain those in the profession who will be the future leaders. Talent acquisition and retention is about creating and maintaining a school climate that promotes professional learning, challenges individuals, recognises achievements, provides opportunities for professional growth and puts people at the core of all business.

*The comprehensive set of references that accompanies this article is available from the author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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