



## Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal

Winning the talent war: How learning impacts on retention

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# Review articles

## Winning the talent war

### *How learning impacts on retention*

#### Talent matters

Globalization and the seemingly incessant advances in technology have helped make the competitive environment increasingly challenging for businesses today. But these are not the only issues. Companies in addition have to cope with demographic shifts. The workforce is aging, and there is a shortage of young workers available to fill the voids left by retirements.

Under the circumstances, retaining existing talent accrues even more importance. The value of talent is indisputable. It can prove hard for others to replicate and might also be utilized strategically in the quest to achieve success for the firm.

There are several negative implications when key employees leave to work in a rival organization. These include:

- loss of knowledge and expertise;
- likelihood of critical information getting into competitor hands; and
- need for considerable investment to hire and train replacements.

Although some debate persists, talent is acknowledged as being reflective of both nature and nurture. Innate qualities combine with those generated through education, training and other social and environmental factors.

Organizations vary in their approach to talent development. For some, the focus is almost exclusively on what are defined as “high potentials”. Such employees are seen as possessing the scope to rise to executive level within the firm. These employees are distinguished by such as their intelligence, creativity, social skills, leadership qualities and team orientation. In addition, they are regarded as good negotiators who are flexible, independent and able to cope with stress. Others take a more panoramic view. Talent is seen as ubiquitous in their firms with every employee having the potential to add value.

#### Factors which aid retention

Future demand for talent seems certain to outstrip supply. Retention should therefore be high on the agenda of any organizational with a desire to sustain its competitiveness. The key is to identify factors that increase the appeal of a company to its workforce.

Any temptation to leave the firm is lowered when an employee feels that he or she is presented with the chance to learn and grow. But without such opportunities, the grass will undoubtedly look greener elsewhere. Given its critical importance, companies should strive to create a working and learning environment in which support plays a prominent role. In such a climate, particular emphasis needs to be placed on:

- provision of work which is both meaningful and challenging;
- empowerment of employees and giving them responsibilities;
- enabling a degree of autonomy over work tasks; and
- ensuring that opportunities are available for individuals to develop and advance.

In addition, it pays to recognize employee contributions and reward effort accordingly. Effective communication across the firm is likewise a must, while it is always beneficial if working relations among colleagues are positive.

Given the available evidence, it would be foolish to dispute that learning and development can significantly impact on aims to retain talent. Making these issues a focal part of retention strategies would clearly represent a smart move. Creating a working and learning environment which is appreciative can pay rich dividends. Key individuals become more likely to remain with the organization and less likely to leave for pastures new.

### Different approaches to learning and development

However, it is not simply a case of creating a positive climate to learn and work in. The approach adopted is critical too. In the conventional way, talent is perceived as providing a means to address existing shortfalls in organizational capabilities. Such a perspective has obvious limitations. It is essentially a reactive approach whereby learning activities are largely geared toward pre-identified business needs.

This approach seeks to find solutions to specific problems that are preventing the attainment of organizational goals. Emphasis on the current situation invariably means that training is only carried out when such a problem has been identified. Adherence to prevailing rules and procedures is also the norm.

In contrast to what is termed the “gap approach” is an alternative that is oriented toward the individual. The “appreciative approach” focuses on personal qualities as a means to help the firm change and grow. Learning in this context is perceived as a way to further enhance existing talents and capabilities. Companies perceive employee strengths as a way to create new opportunities. Another key characteristic is that individual initiative is encouraged. Ultimately, it makes sound business logic to develop learning agendas which best permit application and enhancement of employee strengths.

All the indications are that a learning and working climate founded on an appreciate approach will have the strongest impact on retention. But certain aspects of the gap approach have a role to play as well. For instance, employees do value having some structure in the workplace. Autonomy is naturally relished. But having the support of formal procedures is likewise seen as important in persuading them to stay.

Retention can also be influenced by individual-level characteristics. Evidence suggests that age is an important factor. Younger people are more prone to change jobs than their older counterparts. That is hardly surprising. After all, new employment is not as easy to find for older workers leaving their present posts. The related issue of seniority can have a similar impact. Individuals who have built a lengthy career within a certain organization typically enjoy benefits in the shape of position, status and respect. To attempt to build such benefits from scratch again in a different company would appear an intimidating task to many people.

**Under the circumstances, retaining existing talent accrues even more importance.**

## Retention should therefore be high on the agenda of any organizational with a desire to sustain its competitiveness.

Intention to stay is also likely to be greater among employees with a favorable attitude toward learning and creativity. To some extent, a similar picture can be deduced about those who perceive themselves to possess leadership qualities. Ambiguity is evident here though. This factor can also prompt the decision to leave. Consequently, choosing whether to stay or go might depend on how relevant the individual regards his or her leadership skills to the current firm.

### Comment

The review is based on: "Influence of learning and working climate on the retention of talented employees" by Govaerts *et al.* (2011). The authors present a highly informative article in which talent retention is explored. Key factors at both organizational and individual level which aid retention goals are identified. It is argued that a proactive learning climate in which employees are granted a high degree of autonomy has the greatest impact.

### Reference

Govaerts, N., Kyndt, E., Dochy, F. and Baert, H. (2011), "Influence of learning and working climate on the retention of talented employees", *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 35-55.

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