PRACTICES FOR THE RETENTION OF SCARCE AND CRITICAL TECHNICAL SKILLS: THE CASE OF THE KWAZULU-NATAL DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT

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ABSTRACT

The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Transport has experienced a continuous staff turnover, especially regarding scarce and critical technical skills, is not efficient. Preliminary research findings discovered that appointed employees only remain in the Department of Transport for periods not exceeding five years on average and then resign or move to the private sector, municipalities, or non-governmental organizations. The study aims to explore the employers' retention practices for managing critical skills, using the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Transport as a case study. The study seeks to explore the practices employed in order to retain scarce and critical technical skills. The study employed an exploratory qualitative research approach and used focus groups and interviews as data collection methods. The purposive sample that was used in this study involved ten senior managers and 30 skilled technical employees including engineers, production engineering technicians, and surveyors.

The study revealed that the main reason for the exits of technical and scarce skilled employees in the Department is linked to remuneration. The Department is unable to offer competitive salaries. The Department must develop different drivers of retention to make them competitive beyond remuneration. The study also revealed that the Department has struggled to retain skilled technical employees for many years due to retention strategies that are not competitive. The study recommends that the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) should open discussions on the review of the Occupation Specific Dispensation.

Key words: Staff Retention, Technical Skills, Attrition, Job Satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of human resources has been widely acknowledged amongst other factors of production. Organisations are increasingly placing more value on human resource capacity development. The competitive business environment has seen many organisations continuously developing strategies to bridge the war on talent. Irrespective of these strategies, skills shortages remain one of the challenges facing most developing countries such as South Africa (SA). Skills shortages in South Africa have been witnessed for many years. Such shortages include the unavailability of qualified technicians in various fields, such as civil engineering aviation, or construction and water, within the government where qualified

technicians tend to move from government to private sector. In addition, there has been a deficiency of engineering (skills) and related professionals, in SA. This leads to delays in the implementation of projects. Most experienced engineers are working outside the government which is struggling to recruit engineers (Construction Education and Training Authority Sector Skills Plan: 2017-2022). The reasons for the movement of people from the public to the private sector (which have been witnessed for many years) are recruitment and various other government policies which tend not to be favourable to many people. The KZN DOT has faced the same challenge of a continuous staff turnover especially in technical skills areas. The South African Institute of Civil Engineers (SAICE) stated that 1.73 percent of its members has been lost through expatriation in the past three years. Government needs to make advances in order to entice engineers back to South Africa (Business Report, 2019).

Within the KZN DOT it has been noted that there has been a continuous staff turnover especially with regard to scarce and critical technical skills where newly appointed employees stay within the Department of Transport for no longer than five years and then resign or move to the private sector, municipalities or non-governmental organisations. KZN DOT creates posts and recruits staff members, but also loses staff members frequently. This has, however, prompted the need to understand why there has been a higher outflow of staff than inflow, even if the public service has put policies in place, for staff retention (Bernocchi, 2018). It is within this context that this research seeks to evaluate the retention practices of scarce and critical technical skills in the KZN DOT.

The aim of the study was to understand strategies the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Transport could utilise to retain technically skilled employees. Following this introduction, the paper will present the review of the literature, which will be followed by the theoretical framework upon which the research question hinges., This will be followed by the research methods that were used to undertake the study and a presentation of the results. Next there is a discussion of the results and how they link to the literature, and finally we shall present a conclusion and suggest areas for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section covers the concept of retention, giving an overview of retention, methods of retention, challenges on retention and factors affecting retention processes in the KZN DOT

Retention of Employees

According to the Wisconsin State Government's Workforce Planning

"*Retention of employees is a systematic attempt to generate and promote an atmosphere that persuades employees to remain in the working environment by putting policies and practices which address their different needs*".

KZN DOT Retention Policy defined

"*Retention as the retaining of staff who hold the vital skills, knowledge and skills which are relevant for the realisation of the department's goals and objectives through suitable attraction, employment, training and development methods*".

The retention of employees is also defined as the organisation's ability to sustain its valuable employees (Al-Emadi et al., 2015). Similarly, it is defined as a controllable component, in which the right people are aligned to the right jobs in an organisation. Koch et al. (2018) are of the opinion that "*employee retention lies in having the right culture and understanding of what motivates staff*". Organisations need to come up with strategies that create commitment among employees who then see the need to stay with their organisation (Kalina and Rogan, 2016).

The KZN DOT Retention Policy points out that

> *"Skills that the Department target by way of staff retention methods are those skills needed to realise and meet the needs of the Department's strategic objectives and service delivery needs".*

Employee retention is one of the key parameters used to measure any organisation's health (Ghosh et al., 2013). As a method adopted by companies to uphold active personnel and simultaneously meet working requirements, retention is a practice in which the workers are stimulated to stay with the business for a long duration of time until project completion (Metha et al., 2014). Similarly, employers must generate and nurture an atmosphere that inspires employees to remain active by putting policies and practices in place that respond to their desires which are diverse (Mabuza and Proches, 2014).

It is evident from the definitions above, that underlying themes, such as motivation and turnover exist in employee retention. In order to establish the basis of attraction and retention of employees within organisations, it is important to establish what motivates employees to make the choices that they do. One of the fundamental goals of an organisation is the ability to obtain, cultivate and in addition, sustain resources. Human resources are classified as one of the most significant resources that are among the best and most vital skills to an organisation. Strategic and imminent use of these resources is thus essential for organisational success (Ahmed et al., 2013). Unstable economic conditions, globalisation, technological advances and the new generation Y employees (also known as millennials), force organisations to acclimatise. Successful acclimatisation is achieved through a committed and competent workforce. Organisations that practise and understand the importance of retention are brought closer to achieving competitive advantage through their most valuable resource, their human capital. Kalina and Rogan (2016) stated that a few years ago, retention of scarce and critical technical skills employees received overwhelming consideration because many people with such expertise left their organisations for other opportunities. It is within this context, where competition became a global phenomenon which affected various companies who needed to develop and retain a loyal, committed and able workforce, that retention got enormous attention (Larsen, 2017).

Challenges of Retention

It is pertinent to note that employee retention is always a challenge as employees leave their employment for various reasons. Staff turnover is unsettling, and has a negative effect on institutions in different ways where productivity and service delivery then suffer. Letshokgohla (2015) pointed out that employees with scarce skills are in high demand within the South African government and technical staffs have been difficult to replace or source and retain. The Department also faces the same challenge of staff retention due to staff turnover, which is caused

by many factors. Such factors include the lack of capacity building opportunities for staff where there is limited access to staff growth and proper training opportunities (Lin, 2017). Another challenge involves a lack of a competitive compensation system. Employees are usually productive when they see that their compensation is on par with their output and if it is not, some will start to look for a job elsewhere or become demotivated. The lack of resources and tools to perform duties is a further problem that leads to challenges of staff retention and staff turnover. The Department of Public Service and Administration emphasised that institutions need to put in place resources that meet the demands of the job so that employees are retained.

Job Stress

Job stress is another challenge making retention difficult. If employees' stress levels are high, the chances are high that employees are then unproductive and sad (Mabuza and Proches, 2014). Poor communication has an influence on staff turnover at various institutions. If the work is not interesting or the environment is not conducive for staff to work, employees become demotivated and likely to leave. In addition, employees leave institutions if they do not gain experience, hence job descriptions need to be constantly reviewed and ensure that staff members are happy and motivated.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is defined as the complete approach towards a person's current job which incorporates the opinions, feelings and thoughts about the job. A right attitude to the job shows fulfilment in the job (Kaplan, 2015). A study by Meyers and Van-Woerkom (2014) revealed a positive correlation between job satisfaction and the intention to stay in an organisation. Fisher (2016) supported the above and was of the opinion that a satisfied employee will remain longer within the organisation. Building from the motivation theories, work content is considered an intrinsic motivating factor and thus job satisfaction plays a critical role in sustaining motivational levels of employees (Hoffman and Tadelis, 2018). This is similar to a study conducted by Kalina and Rogan, (2016) that demonstrated a positive association between intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction. Contributing factors include the employee-employer relationship, job security, culture, work conditions, compensation, and training and development. Incorporating these factors into strategies will increase satisfaction, motivation, company performance and hence retention (Metha et al., 2014).

Job Security

Job security is defined as the probability or the assurance that an employee has in keeping their current job (Metha et al., 2014). Rath and Lee (2015) investigated employee retention as a challenge in the leather manufacturing and resolved in their outcomes that a progressive relationship happens between retention and job security. In these dynamic economic times, job security is becoming an important factor for employees to remain within their current organisations. Nel (2017) further supports the above, the study finding that job security is a lasting objective for employees. The study further highlighted that although monetary components initially attract employees in the short-term, they require long-term approaches to

fully withstand them. These long-term approaches can be realised when businesses simultaneously invest in themselves and their employees (Schein, 2010).

Organisational Culture

An organisation's culture is defined as a set of beliefs, expectations, values, norms and work routines that are shared by organisation members and that influence how they relate to one another and work together to accomplish organisational goals (Schein, 2010). In essence, it is an organisation's differentiating factor. Alvesson (2014) stated that culture is the most critical component in retaining staff since it provides the necessary connection between the employee and the organisation. The depth of that connection in turn affects motivation and performance. The study by Goksoy (2016) is consistent with this view as it cited culture as a reason for employee retention. Alvesson (2014) further demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between organisational climate, financial performance and staff satisfaction. When organisations have a culture that filters support, growth and development, it enriches employee commitment, performance and retention (Schein, 2010).

Compensation

Compensation, in financial terms, refers to the pay package; wages and salaries employees are reimbursed with for the work that they do (Grobler, 2011). Compensation forms a predominant part of literature that applies to employee retention. The study by Hoffman and Tadelis (2018) revealed a positive relation between compensation and company performance. Mabuza and Proches (2014) further indicated that compensation is a substantial factor for job satisfaction, motivation and hence retention. Compensation is still valued as an element of retention. In contrast, it is argued that although financial compensation is essential in attracting and recruiting it is not the primary motivator for employees (Meyers and Van-Woerkom, 2014). It is also aligned with Herzberg's theory that stated that compensation is not a sustainable motivator. For organisations to truly utilise compensation as a sustainable retention factor, they need to incorporate both financial and non-financial components of compensation (Metha et al., 2014).

Effective Leadership

Leadership is defined as the conduct of a person guiding the undertakings of a group towards a mutual goal (Northouse, 2018). Effective leadership is the ability to gain respect from both internal and external stakeholders whilst employees are inspired and motivated to stay within the organisation (Mencl et al., 2016). The study is consistent with the above as it ranked leadership skills and supervisors' management as imperative factors for motivation. Contributing to this, Metha et al. (2014) illustrated a positive relationship between effective leadership and the intention to stay in an organisation. Vasquez (2014) further indicated that the management–employee relationship contributes to effective employee satisfaction and hence company performance. Northouse's (2018) research demonstrated an important association between employee empowerment and employee retention. When employees feel that their contribution is

meaningful, valued and supported by their leaders, they are fulfilled and empowered, which leads to motivation and hence retention (Elegbe, 2016).

Training and Development

Training is defined as the intended effort to expedite the learning of skills and knowledge that are related to the job, whilst development is the acquisition of new skills that simultaneously benefit the employee and the organisation. Commitment and motivational levels decrease when organisations fail to provide meaningful work. An organisation that fosters training and development encapsulates the essence of recognising and valuing its employees and demonstrates management commitment (Larsen, 2017). Coetzee and Stoltz (2015) study is consistent with this, demonstrating the critical role training and development opportunities have in retaining staff. In contrast, the study by Larsen (2017) demonstrated no positive correlation between training and development for experts and retention. Despite this contrasting view, there is much literature that favours training and development in retention. Meyers and Van-Woerkom (2014) in their study found a meaningfully positive affiliation between training and employee retention. This is further reinforced by Fisher's (2016) study which illustrated a positive relationship between company performance and effective training and development. Training and development thus aid in realising competitive advantage as they simultaneously increase commitment, retention and organisational success (Larsen, 2017).

Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is defined as the contented stated of equilibrium accomplished between an employee's private lifestyle and the primary priorities of their employment position (Hoffman and Tadelis, 2018). Metha et al. (2014) stated that "*an employee's intention to stay in an organisation is directly linked to the ability to achieve work-life balance*". Organisations that understand the priority of work-life balance and assist in achieving it, will aid in retaining employees (Vasquez, 2014). Deery and Jago (2015) further support this and are of the opinion that a flexible work schedule could assist in achieving this balance. Consistent with this view, Hlengwa's (2015) study demonstrated that the amount of flexibility is positively associated with employee retention.

The study by Rath and Lee (2015) contradicts this view as results found no affirmative association between work-life balance and retention; the rationale could be attributed to a younger participant group. The dynamics of the new generation workforce have changed with more female candidates entering the workforce and obtaining high-level positions. One of the greatest contributors to female retention is the ability to balance family commitments. Organisations that recognise this, and change and implement strategies for it, can tremendously increase commitment and motivation and hence employee retention. When factors such as job satisfaction, job security, culture, compensation, training and development and work-life balance are incorporated into organisational strategy, it will optimise employee retention. Ghosh et al. (2013), on the other hand, argued that the traditional factors of retention such as compensation, training and employee development are 'futile'. The pattern in literature discussed above contradicts this statement as it demonstrates the positive correlation between these traditional factors and motivation, hence retention.

The Concept of Turnover

This section covers the concept of turnover and attrition wherein definitions examine the rate at which employees exit an organisation and situations where one retires. These will be considered respectively.

Turnover is defined as the speed at which the workforce exits an organisation and is substituted by new personnel; Hollenbeck et al. (2018) similarly defined turnover "*as the termination of association in the organisation by individuals who expected monetary benefits from the organisation*". Voluntary turnover happens when an employee elects to leave an organisation whilst involuntary turnover occurs when an employee is requested to leave. Turnover accounts for one of the greatest costs in an organisation; hence, it is the greatest motivator for retention. Some of these costs include training, recruitment and selection (Vasquez, 2014). When an effective employee leaves it is referred to as dysfunctional turnover because it negatively impacts on productivity, employee morale, quality of production and financial performance (Rath and Lee, 2015).

The high turnover rate, especially amongst employees skilled in engineering, makes the attraction, and retention of these employees important not only to address the historical inequities in the local industry, but also to ensure much needed diversity that organisations need, to tap into a larger market and gain competitive advantage (Deery and Jago, 2015).

The Concept of Attrition

Attrition in Human Resource terminology is the phenomenon of the employees exiting an organisation (Hollenbeck et al., 2018). Unlike turnover mentioned above, which stipulates that there needs to be replacement when an employee leaves the organisation, attrition happens when an employee retires, or vacates the position (Deery and Jago, 2015). Attrition in a company is usually measured with a metric called attrition rate, which simply measures the number of employees leaving the company, be it via voluntary resignation or being laid off by the company (Hoffman and Tadelis, 2018). It is therefore a steady decrease of employees in an organisation through retirement, resignation or death. Ahmed et al. (2013) agreed that attrition involves departures of employees from an organisation voluntarily or involuntarily which impact on the organisational bottom line. When an employee resigns or voluntarily leaves the organisation, a need to replace that person arises where costs are incurred when finding a replacement (Shadding et al., 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As argued by Saunders et al. (2012), exploratory design is useful when there is not much definite information about the phenomena being studied. In this study, an exploratory research design was deemed the most suitable since within the KZN DOT a study specifically focused on scarce and critical skills has never been conducted. The study took a cross-sectional time dimension and a qualitative research methodology.

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2013), a population of a study can be defined as "the entire group of people, events or things of interest that the researcher wishes to investigate". This means that the population of the study is the sum total of all the elements that the study is all

about. It includes those who actually participated in the study and those who did not but are affected because the results obtained are to be generalized to them as well.

One of the researchers happened to be a senior employee of the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Transport, who having been granted a permit to access the list of all the employees of the Department, was able to identify 150 employees that are deemed as falling under scarce and critical skills. It was these 150 employees who formed the population of this study.

Purposive sampling was used simply because it increases representivity, saves time, and saves money and effort. Furthermore, it enables the researcher to reach the targeted participants quicker. In addition to that, participants with specific characteristics are easily identified when using purposive sampling. However, one must also be aware of possible disadvantage in the form of bias on the part of the researcher. The researcher was cognisant of this weakness throughout the research. As an attempt to avoid bias, the researcher allowed all those who were willing to take part in the study to do so irrespective of their colour, race, colour, creed, or position at the KZN DOT as long as they were part of the targeted category.

The purposive sample that was used in this study involved 10 senior managers and 30 technical skilled employees, including engineers, production engineering technicians and surveyors. Senior managers were identified because of their knowledge and experience with retention phenomenon and furthermore their willingness to participate and communicate their experiences and opinions. The researcher preferred the above methods so as to focus on the population's particular characteristics which were of interest, and included diversity in terms of background, cultural differences and different age groups respectively. The 10 managers participated in the structured interviews while the 30 employees participated in the Focus Group Discussions (FGD's).

Data were collected using two methods, namely in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Three focus group discussions, each comprising of 8-12 participants, were carried out. These were a group of senior managers and technical skilled employees responding to effective methods and strategies used by the KZN DOT to retain technical skilled employees, as well as discussing shortcomings related to Occupation Specific Dispensation (OSD). FGDs formed the bigger part of the research in terms of the number of staff people who participated. Focus groups were prioritised because of their advantages. For example, one advantage is that the participants' responses are questioned, analysed, and challenged by the group. This helped the researcher to end up having the most accurate information of what staff at DoT thought. In addition, meaning was collectively constructed. All in all, participants for FGDs were 30 and 10 for interviews. Information gathered through interviews was verified and compared with that from the FGDs. Data during interviews and FGDs was gathered through audio recording to avoid missing what participants had replied to the question. Audio recording helped to write down participants' answers without error or distorting meaning.

In most cases qualitative data is an analysed using NVivo tool, content analysis, MSWord and other methods. Content analysis was used to analyse data in this study. Authors of research books such as Sekaran and Bougie (2016) and Creswell (2014) all agree that content analysis is essentially a coding operation and that it is nothing else but the standardization of collected data into some conceptual framework. The importance of coding arises from the fact that data comes in different forms and must therefore be standardized into categories or forms.

The researcher utilised content analysis to categorise verbal or behavioural data. All key findings from interview notes and transcripts were copied and pasted into the template under the relevant themes. Coding of data entailed two main stages which involved grouping data into different categories and then assigning numbers to categories that were created. These data analysis methods were used to validate the information collected from the field. Participants' responses were used by the researcher to evaluate the effectiveness of the application of the KZN DOT's retention policies. The analysis was also based on the descriptive analysis of information extracted from the Annual Performance Plan of the KZN DoT. This plan refers to targets and the allocated budget for transport infrastructure.

FINDINGS

The study identified five main areas as central to the continuous failure to retain technical and skilled staff by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health. These focal areas include the shortcomings of the Occupational Specific Dispensation (OSD), Remuneration packages, level of Job satisfaction, lack of employees' motivation, and need to amend the OSD.

Shortcomings of the Occupation Specific Dispensation

The findings revealed that the Occupation Specific Dispensation is too rigid. For example, if a technically and skilled employee is offered a job by another organization such as the Municipality the DOT cannot provide a counter offer to the employee. Furthermore, the OSD does not allow flexibility relating to consideration of prior experience of technically skilled employees.

Remuneration

The study revealed that most participants pointed out that the main reason for exits is linked to remuneration where the KZN DOT is unable to offer competitive salaries as provided by the private sector and municipalities. Employees in the private sector and municipality tend to earn more than those in the provincial government. One of the participants argued:

> "*The government has failed to compete with the private sector and municipalities, who offer better and more lucrative salaries.*"

The above statement highlights that the government is not able to provide salaries which are competitive in relation to private sectors and various municipalities. In addition to that the government tends to ignore that by the nature of their work, employees with scarce and critical technical skills need to be utilised within their functional areas, and proper remuneration needs to be considered. It is evident that people with critical skills do not have the patience with handling of projects. This was witnessed in most of the respondents' answers in relation to the shortcomings of OSD:

> "*People with critical skills do not have the patience and if they discover that there are unnecessary delays in handling projects, they become demoralised in a way and begin to think that the public service is not the right place for their critical skills.*"

However, as far as the working environment is concerned, a lot of people are very happy and if the Department was to counter offer them a better package they would stay. This implies that remuneration has been the main reason for exit of employees with scarce and critical technical skills.

Job Satisfaction

In as much as remuneration affects retention of scarce and critical technically skilled employees within the DOT, it was also noted that job satisfaction plays a role in the retaining of staff. Unfortunately, the level of growth that people with scarce and critical technical skills get in the private sector seems better and more favourable than working within the DOT. Job satisfaction which involves the ability to perform certain functions in a good environment was found to be unavailable. In addition, a lack of job titles and the low level of responsibility led to the exit of many employees. Job satisfaction is one of the reasons for the exit of staff with scarce and critical technical skills as some staff are not satisfied with the exposure and experience they get in a limited environment. For example, one of the participants argued:

> *"You will find that people need satisfaction to work in their work environment. In addition to that job satisfaction comes in different forms and such forms include satisfied with financial gains on the job, flexible working hours, the ability to perform certain functions or certain activities and being able to supervise projects and making the job more exciting."*

The above caption highlighted that employees need to be satisfied with their job where exposure creates more experience. Another example of job satisfaction is given by one of the respondents who said:

> "*Employees lack exposure to the technical aspects of the job because there are many and the work which needs their technical expertise is limited due to the fact that most of government work is done by consultants rather than department officials. Hence many government employees would prefer to go to the private sector to get that experience. There is a lack of external motivation for those employees compared to those who graduate from the technical colleges. When they are working with consultants, they get more experience than working in the department."*

The above statement also means that due to poor job satisfaction, government employees tend to prefer moving to the private sector and municipalities where they would get experience, rather than working in the government. This may also mean that the exit of employees with scarce and critical technical skills is exacerbated by lack of or no career path for officials.

Motivation for Employees

Most of the respondents indicated that there is over-reliance on consultants, implying that the private sector made it difficult for the government to retain staff with relevant skills. The respondents indicated that there has been no motivation for employees to join or stay in the department because of poor remuneration, excessive administrative work and the over reliance on consultants as indicated earlier. This made it difficult for government employees to gain more experience and exposure, as a lot of work was given to the consultants. This then led to

demotivation of government employees who ended up not gaining experience on their jobs. To illustrate this point one of the respondents went on to say:

> "*The difficulties of government's rigidity regarding administrative work and too great a reliance on consultants and the private sector has affected us and the other difficulty lies in government's failure to pay employees better in spite of being able to pay more to consultants leading to no motivation to join the department.*"

All participants cited the government's entry level salary which is very low, making it difficult to attract the required technical skills. For example, one of the participants said:

> "*The Department is not able to pay its employees more but is willing to pay more to consultants thereby creating a difficulty within the department in terms of remuneration. This implies that there is nothing much that motivates people to join the department. Employees would rather join consultants who pay better, promote opportunities and career pathing. Salaries in the department are very low and unattractive to the extent that very few people are willing to join the department. If we advertise our posts in comparison to the municipality and the private sector, our salaries are low.*"

This seems to suggest that as long as there is poor remuneration and over reliance on consultants, government employees will remain demotivated as these two aspects play a key role in DOT.

Amendment of the OSD

The researcher found that employees believe that the OSD can be improved through negotiating with unions, training, and investing in talent management in order to retain employees and increase salaries as employees move to the next levels. It was also noted that the review of the OSD would address discrepancies which in turn would attract technical staff. A need to amend the OSD was highlighted by all respondents such that it will be applied based on departmental circumstances without having a link between the OSD and those individuals who are professionally registered. It was argued that:

> "*There is a need for consideration of the time the technical person spends in training for that to be recognised within the OSD. In addition, if the department invests in its employees and helps them not to feel as if they are outcasts, it would even help to address issues around staff retention.*"

The above statement shows that there is a need for the department to revise its OSD to ensure that it can retain employees with critical skills. Failure to invest in government employees who have critical and technical skills would also mean that this challenge will continue to haunt the department. Hence there is a need to address such discrepancies to ensure that employees with technical skills will not leave their jobs. Other discrepancies highlighted are in salaries for candidates and those registered. Salary differences are not great, except for the fact that those registered can get a permanent job with a job-related salary package. One of the respondents highlighted that:

> "*The OSD is rigid, hence each department should be able to apply or amend it based on the department's circumstances rather than applying it the same way across the entire public service. More so, if you register with technicians and you have got to register as a technologist there is no huge gap on the salary level.*"

The above citation shows that OSD makes it difficult for retaining employees with technical and critical skills. A need to remove the linkage between OSD and those who are professionally registered was pointed out as this had hindered retention of technical and critical skills employees. One of the respondents argued:

> "*There is a need to remove the link between the OSD and those who are professionally registered. If the intention of the OSD was to retain skills by giving them recognition, why did they limit it to people with registration or a qualification?*"

This seems to suggest that OSD needs to be amended where there is a removal of links between OSD and those who are professionally registered. This in a way will then assist in retention of technically skilled employees in the KZN DOT.

DISCUSSION

The following discussion will be based on three aspects of the findings namely factors contributing to KZN DoT attraction and retention of technically skilled employees, the DOT's recruitment and selection processes and procedures, and in-house support as means to support retention of staff.

Factors Contributing To KZN Dot Attraction and Retention of Technically Skilled Employees

With regards to the retention policy, the implementation of the OSD has had a negative impact on the salary, benefits and career progression of employees where retention was noted as inflexible within the OSD. In addition to that, the implementation of the OSD was noted as having a negative impact on the salary, benefits and career progression of staff with scarce and critical technical skills. Working conditions in the Department are favourable although the issue of remuneration remains a challenge. The level of training and development which staffs receive is not adequate to enable staff to carry out their duties. Training and development are of paramount importance although budgetary constraints remain a hindrance to the process. Engineers and technicians need training in order to earn CPD points to assist with Professional Registration. Internal training is minimal and not yielding the intended results.

The researchers noted that over-reliance on consultants and the private sector made it difficult for the government to retain staff with relevant skills. There has been no motivation for employees to join or stay in the department because of poor remuneration, poor administrative work and the over reliance on consultants. This implies that it becomes hard for government employees to acquire expertise because a lot of work is given to the consultants. This may be because those who have been hired cannot do their jobs properly if that is so, and then the problem is with recruitment. They are not recruiting the best people for the job leading to demotivation of government employees. OSD has led to difficulties in recruiting and retaining technical staff. A need for the amendment of OSD was proposed by respondents to ensure that the DOT recruits and retains suitable staff.

DOT Recruitment and Retention Processes and Procedures

The recruitment methods within the DOT are not flexible and do not accommodate special cases. In addition to that, very few people are mindful of the retention policies. This has made it difficult to implement such policies, causing delays and failure to retain technical employees within the DOT. Most employees are not aware of allowances paid by the Department to technically skilled employees due to the fact that these employees have not received training on government policies - particularly the retention policy. The retention policy was noted as ineffective as it has been overtaken by the implementation of the OSD. A need for the review of the OSD was noted because it is doing more harm than good. An example of appointing a qualified Civil Engineer with a Diploma as an Additional to the Establishment (ATE) Technician and not a permanent employee is very frustrating to the graduates. Hence there are no measures in place which ensure the effective retention processes and procedures.

In-house Support as a Means to Ensure Retention

The occupation specific dispensation (OSD)

A need to for a conversation around OSD amendment and the recruitment and retention policies and strategies at policy level was noted within this research. This would then ensure that all other outstanding issues are addressed. The Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) should open discussions on the review of the OSD. As much as there are positives, a lot of harm has been caused with the implementation of the OSD. It has been noted that compulsory registration with a professional body such as the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA) and or the South African Geomatics Council (SAGC) for appointment and promotion within the respective OSD, is a barrier because there are very few candidates who are professionally registered. Some departments do not implement the OSD properly resulting in employees in this Department being disgruntled when they see posts advertised and filled differently. The OSD also makes it difficult for government departments to employ engineering graduates permanently immediately after completion of their studies. Hence there is a need for a review of the OSD where the link between OSD and those who are professionally registered is removed, and amendment of the OSD applying it, is based on departmental needs and addressing discrepancies within the OSD.

Recruitment and retention policies and strategies

The Department has struggled to recruit and retain skilled technical employees for many years due to recruitment and retention strategies which are not competitive. There is a need to review the strategies and align them with the current economic climate to recruit and retain scarce and critical technical skills in the Department. In order to improve the recruitment and retention of people with scarce and critical technical skills, there is a need to correct challenges with remuneration making it competitive with the private sector and allowing staff to be flexible and become creative thinkers. The recruitment policy should focus on both the technical skills and behaviour of an individual and decision-making process in managerial positions. There is a need to negotiate salary levels during recruitment where remuneration should be considered in

relation to personal profiles and not the profile of the job. The recruitment strategy should be flexible regarding remuneration for people with critical skills. In addition, the current recruitment policy needs to be reviewed so that it can accommodate several outstanding issues.

For the government to retain staff, it should have a clear succession training programme and policy which focuses on both technical and managerial leadership competencies. There should be a vibrant and interesting workplace where limited outsourcing from private sector and consultants is practised. Government should also create an environment for growing careers with a long-term programme of developing the scarce and critical technical skills. In order to retain staff, the government must find other remuneration strategies which will help to retain staff. Such creative remuneration strategies should involve time off, flexi-hours, working from home and adding responsibility, especially with the implementation of projects which would help employees with scarce and critical technical skills to have more exposure and experience. In order for retention to be effective, government should look into a succession plan policy through competence packages and improve the working environment in the Department. Employees should be able to learn and be mentored on their own growth path. It is also critical that the Department intensify the Candidacy Development Programmes in order to fast track professional registration. In relation to strategies for the Department to recruit and retain critical technically skilled employees, government should create a training centre for technically skilled employees so that it acquires the required capacity to deliver. This will help to reduce over-reliance on consultants and the private sector.

The KZN DOT should also implement scarce skills allowances in terms of the Scarce Skills Framework approved by the DPSA in 2005 in order to effectively respond to the challenges of recruitment and retention faced by the Public Service.

Public service regulations

Current regulations are stringent when it comes to counter offers and/or retention. The withdrawal of the regulation relating to the setting of the salary of an employee above the minimum notch in order to attract and/or retain an employee for OSD production posts currently does not permit the Department to counter offer an OSD employee who has been offered a better salary by another Department or private sector.

Practical and managerial level

Mentorship and skills development programmes for both new and existing staff tend to produce practical benefits for organisational development. A need for training and development programmes at managerial level for both new and current staff is proposed as a way of retaining employees with technical skills.

Training and development programmes

The Department should form partnerships with Higher Education Institutions to come up with relevant training programmes which are recognised for earning Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points. This should include short courses for technically skilled employees. Partnerships should also be forged with the relevant Engineering Councils to assist technicians

and fast track candidate and professional registrations. The Department should also revive the Technological Training Centre to cater for the training needs of all technical employees within the Department. In addition to training and development programmes, the government should/have its own sector training centre which would capacitate its employees with scarce and critical technical skills so that they gain the experience required in their field. This will also help them to understand the culture of the Department and learn more about retention policies and procedures. The government should also have mentorship and skills development programmes to support both new and current employees as a way of retaining its employees. It was generally noted that many employees are not conscious of the recruitment and retention policies, hence the Department should organise a programme to make employees conscious of the recruitment and retention policies and provide training deemed of importance.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the presented literature and data it can be concluded that the Department of Transport in KZN has staff with scarce and critical technical skills. However, they leave the department for greener pastures. Retaining employees is critical as a strategy to preserve scarce and critical skills. Scarce skills can be preserved by reviewing policies relating to retainment and satisfaction of employees. Empirical data suggests that the department should invest in in-house recruitment processes rather than utilising outside sources as a starting point. Then the Department needs to look at its retention policy and amend it with the focus on succession planning where recommendations were made. This rounded approach will ensure that the department offers career paths, experience in implementation of technical projects, managerial expertise and reward programmes. They need to ensure that they have measures of keeping employees in positions by using measures beyond remuneration.

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