Impact of Human Resources Managers' Competence on Reducing

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the impact of Hong Kong HR managers' competencies on reducing administrative staff turnover in Hong Kong's higher education. Excessive administrative staff turnover is a primary stumbling block to institutional stability, knowledge retention, and operational continuity. The mixed-methods approach is followed while conducting the study to assess some of the HR competencies, such as strategic positioning, credibility, and HR delivery. Quantitative data from surveys of university administrative staff and qualitative data from interviews with senior HR managers are combined to explore the relationship between perceived HR effectiveness and staff plans to leave. The results of the study indicate that HR managers' strategic competence in creating a positive organizational culture, having effective talent management practices, and having fair remuneration is most highly linked with administrative staff retention. The study concludes that investing in the strategic development of HR professionals is not only an administrative function but also a key strategic imperative for universities striving to enhance organizational stability and performance in Hong Kong's competitive higher education market.

Keywords:, administrative staff turnover, higher education, Hong Kong, HR manager competence, staff retention

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong's higher education market exists in a highly competitive and dynamic environment. As a regional and international education center of great importance, its universities are constantly pushed to excel in research, instruction, and global rankings. Excellence is not just established on the teaching staff; a sound, stable, and highly qualified administrative staff pool is the secret to institutional success. These professionals manage the intricate network of university matters, from student matters and admissions to funds for research, finance, and human resources proper. However, Hong Kong universities, like others elsewhere, also struggle with an epidemic: high administrative personnel turnover. This turnover is creating disruptions in operations, loss of institutional memory, incurring massive recruitment and training costs, and ultimately frustrating the strategic goals of the institution.

The root reasons for administrative staff turnover are multifaceted. They often include perceived shortages of career advancement opportunities, excessive workload demands, pay that is not commensurate with the private

sector, and sometimes a felt lack of appreciation in the academic-focused culture of a university. While such reasons are well known, the strategic relevance of human resources (HR) activities in combating them needs more examination. Long viewed as an administrative support function, the human resources' role in most institutions has evolved into a strategic partner integral to talent management [1] and organizational development. It is particularly pertinent in the rich, people-oriented environment of a university.

It is hoped by this study that the competency of human resources managers is a critical, yet unrealized, factor in the reduction in voluntary turnover among administrative staff. HR performance is not only a result of executing transactional tasks (e.g., payroll, benefits administration) but is also very much a function of the strategic competence of the HR professionals themselves. The Dave Ulrich HR Competency Model [2] provides a solid model for understanding these competencies, which include being a Strategic Positioner (holding an understanding of the business and external environment), Credible Activist (building trust and influencing outcomes), Capability Builder (developing culture and transforming the organization), Change Champion (facilitating and sustaining change), HR Innovator and Integrator (rethinking and aligning HR practices), and Technology Proponent (leveraging technology for HR solutions).

For the universities in Hong Kong, an HR manager as a Strategic Positioner would understand the specific career goals and market forces of administrative staff working within the city's tight labour market. Being a Credible Activist, they would be capable of winning over the confidence of top management and employees and lobbying for retention-friendly policies. As a Capability Builder, they would have a central responsibility for creating an open, welcoming, and involved organizational culture that makes administrative employees feel worthwhile and part of the university's mission.

Given the rational association between HR capability and organizational performance [3], there is an obvious gap in the literature adopting this context for the retention of non-academic employees in Hong Kong's higher education sector. Most of the existing research addresses academic faculty turnover or universal industries. The unique cultural and organizational behaviours of universities in Hong Kong, such as their east-west hybrid operational modalities, trilingual (English, Cantonese, Mandarin) settings, and distinct regulatory frameworks, create a unique environment that necessitates HR solutions to be tailored accordingly.

Therefore, this study is designed to close this gap. It seeks mainly to empirically examine the influence of HR managers' competencies on administrative staff's intention to leave in universities in Hong Kong. It attempts to move beyond gossip to establish definitively whether there is a causal link between administrative staff perception of the effectiveness and strategic role of their HR department and their own intention to remain with the institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Staff turnover in employees is a big issue for organizational performance [4] in every industry, and the higher education industry is no exception. Whereas much research focuses on faculty retention, administrative staff stability is as significant for business sustainability, fiscal health, and institutional memory. Administrative university staff are the backbone that keeps academic operations intact, student affairs intact, and strategic

administration intact. Global competitive labor markets and the specific stresses of the field of higher education (such as intense global ranking competition, budget constraint, and highly mobile staff) magnify turnover issues in Hong Kong [5]. To curb this, addressing root causes is the first step. Common antecedents in literature include career developmental opportunities deprivation, workload overload, and burnout, perceived inequity between university compensation and the private sector, and perception of not being valued in academia-oriented university culture [6].

2.1 Evolution of the strategic role of the human resources manager

The stereotypical picture of Human Resources as primarily an administrative department that deals with payroll, compliance, and policy enforcement has experienced a dramatic evolution. The initial research work of scholars like Dave Ulrich has established HR as a strategic business partner whose role is integral to organizational performance [7]. Transformation is most relevant in advanced institutions like universities that tend to have decentralized structures and various stakeholder groups. Strategic human resource management theory [8] suggests that human resources in an organization are a strategic resource and that HR practices can potentially be a source of sustainable competitive advantage [9]. The effective use of strategic human resource management, though, rests on the capability of the HR practitioners to develop, champion, and implement them. Their ability to align HR strategy with institutional objectives matters most.

2.2 Conceptualizing HR competence

To operationalize the concept of competence, this review employs the widely used Dave Ulrich HR Competency Model as its primary framework. The model provides a broad set of domains identifying an effective HR practitioner in the modern era.

1. Strategic positioner: The ability to understand the external business environment (e.g., education policy in Hong Kong, labour market) and translate it into internal agendas.
2. Credible activist: Developing trusting relationships with stakeholders (senior managers to administrative staff) and offering an assertive point of view.
3. Capability builder: Establishing and shaping a high-performing organizational culture that releases employee potential.
4. Change champion: Leading, orchestrating, and sustaining change within the organization.
5. HR innovator and integrator: Developing innovative HR solutions and rolling them out with integration and alignment for maximum impact.
6. Technology proponent: Leveraging technology to improve HR efficiency and employee experience.

In staff retention, a strategic positioning HR manager would compare pay competitively in Hong Kong. Capability builders would develop leadership programs for administrative staff to enhance career development paths. Credible activists could meditatively balance staff concerns with management budget constraints in a rational way.

2.3 Nexus between HR competence and employee retention

Available literature establishes a strong, though indirect, link between positive HRM and reduced turnover intentions. The mechanism behind it is the creation of perceived organizational support (POS) and employee engagement [10]. When employees perceive that the firm values their contribution and cares for their well-

being (high POS), they are more engaged and less likely to intend to leave. The competence of HR managers is the force that transforms generic HR practices into effective levers of POS development.

Competent HR managers (as capability builders) do not simply oversee training budgets; they develop clearly defined, visible career lattices for administrative staff, demonstrating a tangible investment in their future [11]. An HR strategic positioner will conduct extensive market surveys so that remuneration packages for administrative personnel become competitive in Hong Kong, not just within the academic sector, thereby removing financial push factors. A good activist and change champion will be capable of conveying the university's vision to administrative personnel, making them feel included in the institutional mission. They can also encourage work-life balance and non-academic contribution reward schemes that specifically negate feelings of not being valued.

Meijerink, Beijer, and Bos-Nehles [12] found that the presence of HRM practices particularly enhances employees' personal and job resources (e.g., skills, empowerment, support), whereas employees' evaluation of these practices has a greater influence on their job attitudes, such as satisfaction and commitment. Takeuchi et al. [13] found HR managers' competency in strategic contribution to be the strongest predictor of employee retention outcomes. Knies et al. [14] believed that strategic HRM enhances employees' motivation and organisational performance. They empirically examined the connections between HRM, employee attitudes and behaviour, and performance in the public sector.

2.4 Hong Kong context and identified research gap

The literature reveals a significant gap when set against Hong Kong's unique higher education context. The universities of Hong Kong operate at the crossroads of Eastern and Western management philosophies, in a densely populated, high-cost, and highly competitive financial hub. The administrative personnel are multicultural, comprising residents and expatriates with different expectations and mobility [15]. Also, the sector is subject to some government policies and funding models, which influence HR planning and budgeting for staff compensation. While generic studies on turnover and HR capacity are abundant, there has been a limited study specifically to investigate.

The primary reasons for turnover intention of administrative (non-academic) staff in Hong Kong universities. The perceived level of HR competency in these specific institutions from the perspective of administrative staff. An empirical analysis of which specific HR competencies (e.g., strategic positioning versus HR delivery) have the greatest mitigating effect on turnover intentions in this specific cultural and organizational context. Most existing studies are either Western-centric, industry-generic, or focused on academic faculty turnover. This study aims to fill this critical gap by applying the Ulrich competency model to the underresearched population of administrative staff in Hong Kong's world-class higher education sector. By doing so, it will provide evidence-based recommendations to local university leaders and HR practitioners so that they can strategically invest in those competencies that will most enhance staff retention and organizational resilience.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study will employ convergent mixed-methods design, quantitative survey data, and qualitative interviews in parallel. This is to get deep insight into multi-faceted influences on administrative staff turnover and to examine critically HR department competencies' influence on the higher education sector level. The quantitative strand will employ standardized questionnaires to gather statistical data on employees' views about primary organizational factors. Concurrently, the qualitative component will consist of in-depth interviews with the major stakeholders to collect rich and detailed data about their opinions and experiences. The integration of these datasets will allow for an incisive analysis of the research problem.

3.2 Sampling and sample size

The population of the study will be all administrative personnel in the institutions of higher learning. Purposive sampling techniques will be applied to enroll participants who directly deal with or are impacted by the institution's HR practices, as they possess the most appropriate information concerning research interest. The researcher selects this method to achieve a sample that offers information-rich cases to analyze the relationship between staff turnover and HR competencies. A target sample of 200 administrative staff is intended. This quantity was determined to be sufficient for useful statistical analysis but logistically feasible within the confines of the study period and budget.

3.3 Data analysis

Quantitative information collected by the questionnaire will be analyzed statistically. Descriptive statistics like the arithmetic mean, median, mode, and standard deviation will be computed to synthesize the responses. Subsequently, inferential analyses like correlation and regression will be conducted with a view to determining the relationship between identified HR competencies and employees' turnover rates. This research aims to establish the extent to which the use of specific HR practices predicts reduced turnover. Response scales from the Likert-scale [16] questions shall be converted to numbers for statistical processing. The quantitative research findings shall be presented in tables, graphs, and charts to enhance readability.

For the qualitative component, there will be a thematic analysis of literature informed by the model established by Saunders et al. [17]. This involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) related to HR competencies and employee turnover, as extrapolated from the research questions and extant scholarly literature. The outcomes of this analysis will provide depth and context, supplementing and augmenting the quantitative findings to facilitate a more complete understanding of the research problem.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The higher education sector in the Hong Kong administrative staff survey reveals a moderate degree of satisfaction overall with the career development opportunities provided by the HR department. Nearly half of

the staff report that they have favorable perceptions of the career development opportunities, which means that the initiatives of the HR department to provide such opportunities have been fruitful for most of the workforce.

59% of the participants agree that the current HR practices effectively foster a good working climate at universities. This implies more than half of the workers have a good view regarding HR practices, making good efforts to improve a good workplace culture, i.e., taking these steps thoroughly and being valued by many of the employees.

Research indicates that administrative staff at universities tend to have differing opinions regarding appreciation from the HR department. Around 50% of the respondents indicated that they are satisfied with the existing reward and recognition programs, suggesting that the schemes work for half of the employees. Around 40%, however, have been left in suspense or undecided on whether their efforts are adequately rewarded. These findings identify an area of concern for change, suggesting that while modern HR practices are successfully addressing issues to a degree, they require adjustment to address the concerns of a large section of staff and foster higher satisfaction levels.

There is a polarized perception amongst staff on the degree of effectiveness of the HR department in resolving grievances at universities. 48% of the respondents hold a positive attitude towards HR (score of 4 or 5) and have confidence in its ability to handle their grievances appropriately. However, 26% of the respondents view HR negatively (score 1 or 2), suggesting that their grievances are not adequately attended to. The findings suggest there is a need for HR to enhance its procedures for handling grievances so that the entire workforce feels more consistent, response, and trust.

Approximately one-third of the participants express a high intention to support the university as a good workplace. This positive feedback means that current HR practices have succeeded in providing fulfillment and support to a significant population of workers. It also suggests that many employees remain hesitant to actively support the university, suggesting that stronger HR practices will be needed to increase total endorsement and participation.

A vast majority of university administrative personnel perceive HR skills as necessary for minimizing employee turnover. Specifically, 70% of the respondents view such skills as "Extremely Important" (50%) or "Very Important" (20%). The fact that there is so much consensus suggests general confidence that well-evolved HR practices are central to maintaining a stable, contented employee pool and therefore to the strategic importance of investing in HR competencies to maximize retention outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The study determined that three of the core HR competencies are instrumental in decreasing administrative staff turnover in Hong Kong universities. Being vital to trust establishment, role clarification, and career development support directly affect staff satisfaction and retention. Recognition and performance reward practices improve morale and commitment, lowering workers' intentions to look for employment elsewhere. Proactive resolution of workplace issues maintains a positive climate and pre-empts dissatisfaction that is

often a cause of turnover. These competencies underscore the strategic importance of good HR management in establishing a nurturing, open, and participative work culture that welcomes long-term retention.

The study confirms that key HR competencies (most significantly communication and appreciation of employees) directly influence retention, consistent with contemporary literature. Regular, informal communication from HR generates loyalty, while recognition and engagement practices reinforce job satisfaction and reduce turnover intentions. Several employees explicitly linked good communication to their intention to remain at the university, highlighting the practical importance of this competence. However, perceived weaknesses in conflict management [18] suggest a gap between HR's current skills and ideal best practices. Although some of the HR practices at some of the universities are viewed as being effective (e.g., recognition), the HR department needs to purposely acquire more conflict-resolution competencies and apply all competencies consistently across all functions to address employees' concerns fully and reduce turnover to the barest minimum.

This study identifies several practical implications for improving HRM practices [19] at universities to decrease administrative staff turnover. They must focus on HR competencies valued by employees (especially communication, employee recognition, and conflict management) to build a more positive work culture that is aligned to organizational goals. HR Department must improve the quality and frequency of communication to address grievances and build trust, implement regular recognition and reward systems to improve engagement and commitment, and strengthen conflict resolution mechanisms to have harmonious workplace relations. In fact, HR best practices likely will significantly lower turnover rates by improving staff satisfaction and stability. By prioritizing these competencies, universities can create a more committed and stable administrative staff. As shown in a survey, there is widespread consensus among administrative staff on the significant role of HR competencies in reducing turnover. These competencies were rated "Extremely Important" or "Very Important" by at least half of the respondents, indicating consensus that effective HR practices, such as communication, employee engagement, and conflict resolution, are significant contributors to job satisfaction and retention.

Such consensus corroborates the reality that employees not only recognize the value of HR skills but also find them central to their decision to remain at the institution. The findings attest that investment in such core competencies helps create a favorable work environment for long-term career advancement and continuity of employment. The study's findings are aligned with the literature in affirming that highly developed HR competencies (particularly communication, employee motivation, and conflict management) are critical to reduce staff turnover and enhance retention. Administrative staff at universities consider these practices to be valuable, indicating that current HR initiatives are meeting primary employee requirements and contributing positively to workforce stability. These results also place the responsibility on the HR department to sustain and strengthen these practices to ensure continued positive acceptance and long-term retention benefits.

These intense staff agreements substantiate the necessity to place these competencies at the forefront of the university's HR strategy to provide a stable, satisfied, and committed administrative workforce. The study

reveals great disparities in administrative staff perception of the effectiveness of the HR department in Hong Kong universities. These divergent views reflect inconsistencies in HR practice, such as uneven implementation of reward schemes or grievance procedures, which may not always align with employee expectations. Variations in individual experience and expectations (particularly in responsiveness and recognition) underline these ambivalent perceptions, consistent with broader research highlighting the significance of factors like clarity of communication and managerial support in determining HR effectiveness. To address issues like these, the HR function must formalize its practices to ensure fairness and responsiveness to diverse staff needs. In doing this, it can reduce perceived inconsistencies, overall satisfaction, and productivity, and create a more pleasant and supportive work environment [20].

This study partially confirms the existing literature on HR competencies and reducing staff turnover, reporting consistency as well as differences with prior research. Findings validate that HR competencies (communication, employee engagement, and conflict management) are most appreciated by employees and directly relate to retention. These practices promote trust, commitment, and positive climate, as theory would anticipate.

The study does reveal differences in perception of HR practices among different universities, namely grievance handling and praise. Mixed staff responses show that theoretical HR efficacy is not necessarily achieved to the same degree in practice, perhaps due to variations in implementation, organizational culture, or unresolved staff expectations. The findings point to the need for context-specific, strategically tailored HR programs that meet diverse staff needs. They also suggest opportunities for additional research to understand why certain practices resonate differently with employee groups and how customization can be leveraged to achieve universal effectiveness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study assessed the effect of HR capabilities on reducing administrative staff turnover in Hong Kong's tertiary education sector. The pilot study and literature review [21] supported the fact that major HR capabilities (e.g., conflict resolution, workforce management, and communication) are crucial to reducing turnover [22].

However, the study observed significant gaps in major universities' HR practices, including the lack of designed grievance procedures and inconsistent reward systems for the workers. Even though the findings substantiate the evidence presented in the literature that HR capability ensures talent retention, they reveal inconsistencies between the best practices discussed in the literature and the ones being implemented at different universities [23]. This indicates that despite the HR department being effective in some areas, others must be improved.

The study concludes that enhancing the consistency and effect of some HR practices, particularly in grievance handling and rewarding employees, has strong potential to enhance employees' satisfaction and loyalty. By addressing these gaps, universities can enhance their care work environment and minimize their high administrative staff turnover rates [24].

Based on the findings of this study, the following is suggested to enhance HR capabilities and reduce administrative personnel turnover in Hong Kong universities.

1. The universities need to invest in continuous, targeted training of HR managers on strategic skills that are determined to be critical for retention. These encompass increased communication, strategic workforce planning, analytics to predict risk of turnover, and conflict resolution. HR is not only an administrative role but a strategic ally in organizational development.

2. HR Department needs to create and utilize clear, transparent, and uniform grievance processing and employee recognition procedures. Inconsistency in this was a major source of dissatisfaction. Formalizing the procedure provides for fairness and equity, demonstrating that the institution values its administrative staff and the effort they put in.

3. HR Department can actively work with senior leadership in building a positive, inclusive, and nurturing organizational culture. Some of the activities could include establishing clear career development pathways for administrative personnel, holding frequent "stay interviews" to assess employees' requirements, and creating robust mentorship programs. This shifts from mere filling of vacancies to actively nurturing and retaining talent.

4. HR Department should be going through this information regularly to identify trends, predict potential flight risks, and create retention strategies that address individual concerns of administrative employees specifically so that interventions are made effectively and on time.

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