

Retaining Leadership Talent in the African Public Sector: An Assessment of the HR Challenge

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This paper reports on a project designed to identify the extent to which and in what ways retaining talented leaders and aspiring leaders in the African public sector is a problem and the underlying reasons for any leadership talent retention problem. A qualitative research methodology is adopted, specifically a constructivist Grounded Theory Research Method (GTRM) approach. Data were collected through thirty-nine semi-structured interviews with public sector HR professionals from 14 African countries. The research found that talent retention of leaders in public sector organizations in Africa is a challenge and a concern. Interviewees reported a wide range of underlying reasons for the problem citing both internal and external barriers such as low prioritization of talent management, corruption, lack of funding and a skilled labor shortage. The study has advanced our knowledge on talent retention of leaders in the ever-changing and increasingly dynamic public sector. The paper highlights a number of potential future research opportunities. The study is limited by the sample size and a single-perspective of only the views of HR managers. There are potentially significant practical implications for those who design, implement and manage talent retention initiatives and for those who manage human resources more generally. The study provides public sector practitioners with helpful information to better address talent retention challenges. The authors contend that this is the first empirical, multi-country study of talent retention for leaders in the public sector in Africa

INTRODUCTION

The topic of talent management has been popular in the academic literature for a decade or more now and it continues to maintain momentum. The interest is, arguably, in large part due to the value that well designed and implemented talent management strategies promise to deliver. This extends to talent management being increasingly viewed as a critical factor in developing successful organizations and as an important strategic priority for businesses generally (Davies and Davies, 2010). Furthermore, effective talent management practices have been linked to an organization's ability to compete successfully (Whelan & Carcary, 2011; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006); to increasing productivity (Nilsson and Ellström, 2012; Whelan and Carcary, 2011); increasing profitability, retention rates and employee effort (Ellehuus, 2012; Christensen-Hughes& Rog, 2008) and improving recruitment outcomes and generating higher levels of employee engagement for organizations (Christensen-Hughes& Rog, 2008).

While the scholarly output on talent management in the industrialized world, and especially in western countries, remains prodigious, scant regard has been paid to the subject as it pertains to Africa. In a very recent paper reviewing the research on talent management, Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen (2016) criticized the literature for being heavily Anglo-Saxon in focus, lacking in social contextualization and only minimally culturally aware. Furthermore, the academic literature on talent management is almost exclusively focused on the private sector: we really know nothing about talent management, and specifically talent retention, in the public sector. Yet the modern public organization, increasingly challenged to be structured and managed as if a private entity, has as much need to retain its best leaders as does the average company and this is as true in Africa as it is elsewhere. There exists a wealth of scholarly literature on the corporatization of the public sector in Africa to support this observation (Yeboah-Assiamah, 2015; Akinboade *et. al.*, 2012; Mahadeo & Soobaroven, 2012; Schouten & Buyi, 2010; Marobela, 2008; Otenyo & Lind, 2006). Corporatization has dramatically changed the public sector and these changes make it critical that the new competitive and lean public entity retain its most talented leaders.

The study that is the subject of this paper collected data through interviews with human resource (HR) team leaders, supervisors, managers, and directors. Some were HR specialists in particular domains such as compensation, recruitment or employee relations while others were HR generalists. HR professionals were chosen as the subjects for the research because talent management is a core responsibility of the broad HR function and the work of HR is inextricably linked with hiring, developing and retaining high performing employees as evidenced in dozens of studies including, for example: George, 2015; Doh *et. al.*, 2011; Uren, 2011. The literature review discusses in detail the links between HR initiatives and talent retention. This paper on leadership talent retention in the African public sector is arranged as follows: firstly, there is a review of the most recent and relevant literature on the topic. This is followed by an explanation of the research design, data collection and data analysis methods. The third section provides a presentation and discussion of the research findings followed by the concluding section which discusses the study's implications, limitations and opportunities for further research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Talent Retention, HR and Desirable Business Outcomes

HR professionals and the suite of personnel initiatives they design and administer impact talent retention outcomes. Talent retention, as part of a broader talent management strategy, is interdependent with all other HR activities. Through the interplay with other HR initiatives, talent retention can also deliver important benefits to the organization. For example; employee engagement can increase retention rates of committed employees (Bhatnagar, 2007; Towers-Perrin, 2003) and committed employees regularly exert a superior level of effort which in turn can influence variables such as service quality, customer satisfaction, productivity, sales, and profitability (Hughes & Rog, 2008). Career management that is tailored to the needs of different generations has similarly been linked to productivity, employee satisfaction and retention (Hageman & Stroope, 2013). Job design is another HR role which has been linked to talent retention. Careful design of jobs that provide challenging tasks that allow talented employees to realize their potential and utilize their full range of skills has been linked to better organizational outcomes. Through job rotations and cross-departmental projects employees can deliver tangible benefits to the organization as they are multi-skilled, adaptable and have a whole-of-business knowledge (Dries *et al.*, 2012; Karaevli and Hall, 2006). Cabrera (2007) also found that job design along with career progression have a positive impact on employees' intentions to leave when designed and managed well. Engaging, meaningful and satisfying jobs along with a clear career path act as a motivator for talented employees to remain with their employer. As turnover is expensive for organizations, retention saves the outlay of avoidable recruitment, selection and onboarding costs. High employee organizational commitment is also an important contributor to talent retention. In order to achieve high commitment, organizations need to establish an employment relationship with their talented employees based on mutual benefits (Dries *et al.*, 2012). An organization aiming to retain its most valuable

employees through commitment-building must also provide them with a continuous work experience that is difficult for competitors to replicate (Bhatnagar, 2007).

Other HR initiatives which have been found to positively impact on talent retention when well designed and managed include work-life balance initiatives (Deery & Jago, 2015; Deery, 2008); accommodating different employee learning styles and the design of leadership development programs (D'Amato & Herzfeldt, 2008) and building a high quality leadership pipeline (Palmer & Gignac, 2012). In India, Doh *et. al.*, (2011) conducted a study which found that performance management, professional development, quality management and corporate social responsibility all had a positive relationship with employee pride in and satisfaction with their organization. Their study further found that a lack of employee pride in and satisfaction with their organization had a strong relationship with both employee intentions to leave and then subsequent turnover.

Talent Management in Africa

It has been argued that there are no clear practical guidelines on how to develop the required knowledge, skills, and abilities African employees need to ensure the realization of the continent's potential (Kamoche *et al.*, 2015). Perhaps this is why African countries continue to rate poorly in terms of their competitiveness (Spies, 2011). Competitiveness requires knowledge creation, which is based on the development of human capital (Mitra *et al.*, 2011). A part of that is hiring, developing and retaining talented employees. In South Africa, there is a gap between those skills that are viewed as critical to improve competitiveness and those that employees regard as strengths in self-evaluation reports (Spies, 2011). The shortage of skilled labor in Africa is a major challenge to talent management (Kock & Burke, 2008; Ghebregiorgis & Karsten, 2006). There is also evidence that western talent management practices such as participative management and the free exchange of ideas, open collaboration and constructive criticism do not work well in the African context (Bagire, 2015; Silva *et al.*, 2015). In Nigeria, further challenges include issues of tribalism, AIDS, bribery, corruption, and resistance to change; moreover, managers mostly rely on word of mouth when selecting new employees rather than transparent practices which seek to hire the best possible candidates (Okpara & Wynn, 2008). In Mozambique, too, there is a considerable reliance on personal networks for recruitment while poor quality training, low financial compensation, and poor working conditions combine to effectively thwart or sideline talent management initiatives (Webster & Wood, 2005).

Despite the challenges, there are examples where other HR initiatives (not talent management) have had a positive impact on employee and organizational outcomes in Africa suggesting that talent management could have an impact too. In Nigerian manufacturing companies, for example, Oladipo & Abdulkadir (2011) found that line management development, innovative recruitment and selection, regular training and development, an equity based compensation system, systematic performance appraisal, effective career planning and active employee participation in decision-making has positively influenced organizational performance. Other studies in Nigeria have returned similar findings (Ilionkhan & Aigbomian, 2014; Onyema, 2014; Akinyemi & Iornem, 2012). In Kenya, training and development as well as adequate reward systems are key human resource practices that positively influence employee job satisfaction (Njuguna *et al.*, 2015) and organizational performance (Dimba, 2010). HRM practices such as recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal and compensation are also positively related to employee job satisfaction in Ethiopian banks, which in turn leads to decreased absenteeism and turnover intentions and assists in better achievement of overall organizational goals and objectives (Ijigu, 2015). In South Africa, non-financial rewards have been found to have a positive effect on an employee's perceived attractiveness of a job offering especially for female employees (Schlechter *et al.*, 2015) and on organizational commitment (Bagraim & Sader, 2007).

HR has also been found to play a positive role in mergers and acquisitions in Africa through employee training, organizational culture building, leadership development and staffing. There is evidence from Ghana (Adomako *et al.*, 2013); South Africa (Singh, 2014) and Nigeria (Anifowose *et al.*, 2011). Finally, in the sole paper addressing HR contributions to employee and organizational outcomes relating to the public sector, Umeh (2008) discovered that HR can improve public sector performance,

but only if officials invest in HR. But again, any investment in human capital is unlikely to have any real impact until corruption is effectively dealt with (Everhart, 2010).

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research study adopted a qualitative research methodology applying the Grounded Theory Research Method (GTRM) as the framework for guiding data collection and data analysis. It has been observed that Grounded Theory is currently the most widely used and popular qualitative research method across a wide range of disciplines and subject areas (Bryant & Charmaz 2010). There are numerous variations of the GTRM itself. These differ, for example, in terms of process, the epistemological inclination of the researcher, and the coding method and types adopted (Bryant, 2014). A review of popular ‘how to’ texts on GTRM highlights the diversity within the Method (*see, for example:* Quinn-Patton, 2015; Urquhart, 2013; Birks & Mills, 2012; Oktay, 2012; Noeranger-Stern & Porr, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This research project has adopted the GTRM proposed and primarily developed by Cathy Charmaz (2006; 2007; 2008; 2014). Charmaz’s GTRM is paradigmatically and epistemologically constructivist which contrasts with the ‘discovery’ orthodoxy. Constructivist GTRM places the researcher as an active participant in each stage of the research process. According to Charmaz (2006), GTRM is a systematic, inductive and comparative approach for conducting research that has the goal of generating a theory.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method. Aside from semi-structured interviews being a proven and popular data collection method in qualitative research, they were chosen for this project for some additional, specific reasons. For example; according to Brinkmann (2014), semi-structured interviews are well suited to research which seeks to understand people’s experiences and the problems they encounter in their work. Semi-structured interviews also fit well with the constructionist orientation to research because when interviewing the interviewer is an active participant in the construction of shared meaning and the production of talk (Brinkmann, 2014; Cooksey & McDonald, 2010). Semi-structured interviews are also well suited to exploring emergent issues which materialize unexpectedly (Cooksey & McDonald, 2010); very appropriate for this study where very little is understood about the research topic. And finally, semi-structured interviews are widely advocated as being very suited to GRTM generally (Bryant, 2014; Urquhart, 2013; Creswell *et al.*, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Douglas, 2003). Consistent with GTRM, data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). Data were analysed using a coding process which makes the data progressively more focused and the analysis progressively more theoretical. Data analysis was conducted manually whereby interview transcripts were initially coded line-by-line (open coding) and then subjected to three further coding processes (selective coding; axial coding and theoretical coding). In addition, the authors made use of analytic Memoing (Saldana, 2014; 2012) during data analysis. The exact coding process the authors followed to analyze data is detailed by Charmaz (2009).

Thirty-nine (39) public sector HR team leaders, supervisors, managers and directors from a range of sub-Saharan African countries participated in interviews. The interviews were conducted in Johannesburg and Cape Town during a series of HR workshops facilitated by this paper’s lead author. Twenty-eight (28) interviewees were female and eleven (11) were male. The median age of the interviewees was 37.3 years and the median professional experience of the group in HR roles was 8 years. The participants came from the following countries: South Africa (9); Tanzania (5); Ghana (4); Botswana (4); Kenya (4); Namibia (3); Angola (2); Mozambique (2); Lesotho (1); Swaziland (1); Gambia (1); Cameroon (1); Senegal (1) and Zambia (1). The interviewees worked in various types of public sector organizations including transportation services; energy and utilities; regulatory authorities and general government departments providing different types of public services. Interviews typically lasted for about an hour and were audio recorded with the participants’ permission. Standard protocols relating to informed consent, participant privacy, data access, usage and storage, information confidentiality and interviewing ethics were adhered to.

The literature review elicited eleven questions on talent retention which were asked of participants during the interviews. These eleven questions are discussed in the following section.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Q1. Is your organization currently adopting a formal talent retention strategy; why / why not?

The literature review strongly indicated that talent retention strategies are not widely applied in Africa. This was borne out by the research findings which discovered that only seven of the thirty-nine interviewees said that their organization had adopted a formal talent retention strategy as part of a wider talent management strategy.

We do. We started about six months ago but there are problems getting support from leaders and interest from employees. It is hard to get people to see it is important.
(Female, South Africa, aged 33)

No because there are so many things that take priority and, I think, we don't know enough to do it well. Where do you begin?
(Male, Ghana, aged 44)

Q2. If yes, what benefits has the strategy delivered to the organization / employees?

Consistent with the literature, those who said their organization had adopted a talent retention strategy all named some specific benefits that their organization and employees had enjoyed.

Employees see that we care about them if they want to be part of the future with us, if they want to progress through the organization
(Male, South Africa, aged 45)

It has enabled us to show everybody that HR is thinking strategically and contributing to the development of our business
(Female, Tanzania, 38)

Q3. Do you think talent retention is important to the public sector; why / why not?

Thirty interviewees said that they believed talent retention to be important to the public sector while seven said that it was not. This finding generally supports the literature which identified that the corporatization of the public sector has increased competition and therefore the importance of retaining talented employees.

It is very important in my view. We can't afford to lose people who we have invested in.
(Female, Kenya, 29)

Talent retention is critical to having key jobs filled and for business to run smoothly. The government and the public rely on us to deliver services.
(Male, Zambia, aged 37)

Q4. Do you believe that talent retention is closely associated with the HR role; whose job is talent retention?

Thirty-five interviewees said that talent retention is closely associated with the broader HR role; four disagreed. This strongly endorsed the literature which demonstrated a strong link between a wide range of HR responsibilities and talent retention. However, only twenty-five interviewees said that talent retention was exclusively the job of HR. Other responses included a shared responsibility between HR and line managers or senior leadership or everybody.

*I think it is a part of the HR role and it is the job of HR to lead the talent strategy
but everybody has to be involved to guarantee success*
(Male, Cameroon, aged 31)

Well, talent management is closely associated with HR such as hiring people and performance appraisal. But senior leaders should take the lead because many people don't listen to HR
(Female, Mozambique, aged 30)

Q5. Which HR initiatives does talent retention interplay with?

Consistent with the literature review, the interviewees named a wide range of different HR functions and programs which they considered were inter-twined with talent retention.

Pretty much everything is linked in HR. So things like workforce planning, career development and recruitment all link with retention of talent
(Male, Ghana, aged 44)

When you do the HR strategy you must integrate all aspects of HR. That means talent management would be integrated with training or with career planning or leadership development
(Male, Tanzania, aged 40)

Q6. Is there a skilled labor shortage in your market and if so, is that a challenge to talent retention?

The interviewees all said that to some degree in their country or region in their country that there was a shortage of the skilled labor they needed and that this is a barrier to talent retention. Some said the shortage was most acute regarding lack of required qualifications while others said the shortage related to relevant or sufficient experience, skills or knowledge. The literature review did highlight a labor shortage in some countries, but the literature did not reflect the extent to which the interviewees highlighted the severity of the labor shortage they perceived.

Oh yes, for sure. Unskilled people are plentiful but we don't need them. For well educated and experienced people, these are hard to find. How can you retain people if you cannot even hire them first?
(Female, Ghana, 27)

We have been searching for some specialized positions for months but qualified people prefer the private companies. It means we must then retain not the best talent, but the next best level; it is having to compromise unfortunately.
(Female, Botswana, 27)

Q7. Do you think western talent management strategies work in the African context?

While the literature review highlighted examples where western talent management practices had limited application to the African context, the interviewees were divided. Twenty-three said that they believed western talent management practices were not well suited to Africa while sixteen said that they believed western talent management practices were applicable in Africa. Of those sixteen, half said that western practices should be modified or adapted to the local environment. Five interviewees stressed the importance of a flexible approach to implementing western talent management practices. The literature review highlighted the Anglo-Saxon bias in the talent management research and many interviewees only cautiously endorsed western practices. Perhaps the development of more culturally-specific talent practices would be welcomed in Africa and might encourage a greater engagement with talent management generally.

Yes and no. I mean sometimes some approaches can work and sometimes other approaches do not work. We are not western and I think we need approaches for our own culture or our own organization
(Female, Angola, aged 50)

Personally I think they don't work, no. Senegal is different with different issues than the US. At least we must change the western ideas for our own needs
(Male, Senegal, aged 41)

Q8. Is tribalism or corruption an issue for your organization and does this affect talent retention efforts?

Nineteen respondents said that tribalism or ethnic affiliation was an issue in their organization but only thirteen said that this affected talent retention efforts. However, thirty interviewees said that some form of corruption (bribery; nepotism; favoritism) affected their organization and twenty-seven said that this corruption impacted on talent retention. The impact was expressed as providing friends and relatives opportunities they did not merit and that this forced out talented employees. Further, that talented employees missed out on opportunities they deserved and subsequently left the organization.

Of course yes. There's a lot of corruption in South Africa; from the very top to the very bottom. Well, it affects talent retention in many ways like useless or lazy people are retained first if they have connections
(Male, South Africa, aged 28)

Tribalism and tribal loyalty is very important for us. It affects every decision in life and work like who to hire, or to promote or give benefits and favors to
(Male, Ghana, aged 44)

Q9. To what extent are 'word-of-mouth' or personal networks influential in your organization regarding recruitment and promotion?

Twenty-six interviewees said that to some extent word-of-mouth and personal networks did influence promotions and recruitment. The literature review found that such covert, informal and non-standardized approaches hinder the effective retention of talent. Therefore, the interviewees largely confirmed the observations in the literature.

Definitely I would agree that finding the new employees we rely a lot on recommendations and this saves time and money to fill the position
(Female, Namibia, 36)

Well, that is a reflection of our culture and small country with small population. Not everybody knows everybody, but everybody knows a lot of people and we like to help each other
(Female, Swaziland, aged 36)

Q10. Has the work of HR in your organization had an impact on organizational or employee outcomes?

All of the interviewees were able to highlight at least one way in which HR had had a positive impact on their organization or on its employees. Many interviewees gave detailed examples of current HR projects with tangible and measurable results. This is consistent with the literature review which highlighted many ways in which HR in African organizations had delivered valuable outcomes.

It has had a big impact on many things that I have seen such as staff morale, effort of employees, developing skills, well, everything
(Male, Tanzania, aged 40)

For the organization there has been cost savings and better customer service because of the efforts of the HR team
(Female, Kenya, aged 29)

Q11. If you do not have a talent retention strategy, do you think it could have a positive impact on employee or organizational outcomes?

Of the thirty-two interviewees who said that their organization did not have a talent retention strategy, twenty-five said their organization had never had such a strategy. Of the other seven, five said the strategy had been a failure and so discontinued while two said the strategy had achieved some success but was discontinued because of a lack of money. Thirty of the thirty two said that a talent retention strategy could have a positive impact on both employee and organizational outcomes depending upon variables such as financing, leadership support, adoption to the African or local cultural context, employee support, internal resources to run the strategy and the implementation and ongoing management of the strategy. None of the interviewees said success would be easy. The literature review suggested that talent retention strategies could be successful in African organizations because other HR initiatives have been successful. However, the interviewees were tentative and cautious in their agreement and the stipulations they noted underscore not only why such strategies could easily fail but perhaps why organizations have not enthusiastically endorsed talent management initiatives in Africa to date.

I think it would have some benefits, yes. But how the strategy is introduced and managed must be excellent because our employees are suspicious of new things
(Female, Gambia, aged 35)

It must make a difference I expect because retention reduces turnover which reduces hiring costs, so that would be a big benefit
(Female, Lesotho, aged 26)

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The research has uncovered some important insights into leadership talent retention in Africa. The findings shed new light on some issues such as the extent of the skilled labor shortage on the continent, the widespread use of informal means of recruiting and promoting talent and the common perception that western talent retention strategies should be adapted for the African context. The research has also

furthered our understanding on the value of talent retention to organizational and employee outcomes and the ways in which tribalism and corruption conspire to the detriment of effectively retaining the public sector's best leaders. The findings endorse the importance of talent retention to the public sector and, while few are actively pursuing a talent retention strategy now, the commonly held view that talent retention does benefit employees and organizations. This means there are significant implications for HR professionals who seek to initiate, plan, implement and manage talent retention strategies for public sector leaders. They are challenged by both external problems (skills shortage, lack of workable approaches and corruption) and internal forces (lack of funds, skeptical colleagues, competing priorities and informal approaches to HR practices). Yet the positive perception of talent management generally provides at least the impetus to make a start. There are also clearly implications for employees and organizations who are not benefiting from talent management activities in terms maximizing organizational effectiveness by building competitiveness, rewarding achievement and maximizing productivity.

This study is limited in sample size and perspective in that it is based upon the views and experiences of a small number of exclusively HR professionals in sub-Saharan Africa. Readers would be wary of transferring the study's findings to even north Africa. Further, perhaps quantitative research, encompassing a larger and more geographically and vocationally diverse sample might deepen our understanding of the issues raised here and could go on to explore other related issues such as the development of leadership talent, the opportunities to adapt western talent retention approaches or the requirements for indigenous talent retention strategies.

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