

Unhappy workers: tackling the reasons why aged care staff leave

By **Linda Belardi** on January 27, 2016 in **News & features**

The first research of its kind has highlighted the importance of workplace conditions, support and culture in understanding why aged care employees stay or leave the sector.

Retention and turnover in aged care has been a significant and longstanding problem in the sector, with estimates pegging average annual turnover at 25 per cent. Retaining the right staff not only has important benefits for clients and continuity of care but also reduces replacement and retraining costs for organisations.

Dr Katrina Radford, a lecturer at Griffith Business School, said the factors influencing whether staff stayed or left aged care were overwhelming under the control of employers.

Dr Radford, who completed her PhD thesis on staff retention and turnover in aged care, found that organisational factors such as working conditions and job satisfaction were far more important than personal factors in determining whether a person continued working in the sector.

“When I looked at personal factors against organisational factors, while around 12 per cent of people’s intentions to leave were impacted by their health, age or intention to retire, the vast majority of turnover intentions were influenced by things the organisation does,” she told *Australian Ageing Agenda*.

“This shows that there is a great opportunity for organisations to invest in their staff, particularly, in a way that works for them.”

Dr Radford said there was no one-size-fits-all approach to encouraging workforce retention and strategies had to be shaped by the aged care setting and by organisations knowing their staff.

One clear finding to emerge from her study was the importance of organisational culture and support from both supervisors and the organisation as a whole to employees’ intentions to stay.

Employers should be investing in leadership training for supervisors and have a clear succession management plan in place, Dr Radford said. Anecdotally, it’s reported that staff are promoted into supervisory roles because of their clinical rather than leadership skills, demonstrating the importance of formal leadership training in the sector.

The study highlighted the significant influence supervisors had on employees feeling valued by their organisation and, interestingly, that the physical presence of a supervisor may not be needed for staff to feel supported.

When analysing the differences between community and residential care, a surprising finding in Dr Radford's research was that community care staff reported higher levels of organisational and supervisor support and significantly higher intentions to stay.

Dr Radford said a possible explanation for this finding was that their perception of support could be influenced by the virtual and immediate support provided by supervisors remotely.

A lack of career opportunities was also consistently rated by employees in the study as a factor that would make them leave, which busted the myth that career development was only valued by younger workers. "The older workforce still wanted opportunities for career development," she said.

What about pay?

According to Dr Radford's research, pay was important but not as influential as other factors such as job satisfaction, job security, having a positive work environment and opportunities for career progression.

In terms of organisational factors influencing staff intentions to stay, job satisfaction and the work environment including culture, management and supportive co-workers were the most dominant factors.

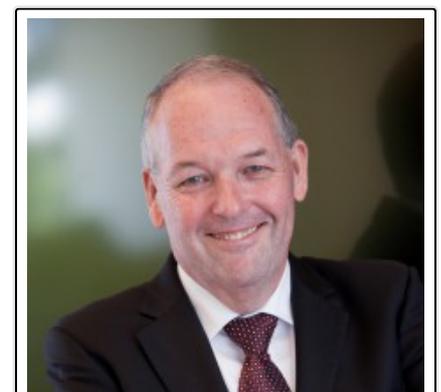
While improvements to pay are needed in the future, Radford says clear succession planning, promotion opportunities, a supportive working environment with manageable workloads, flexibility and choice of hours may influence employees' intentions to stay in the meantime.

Rewards and recognition

Chris Westacott, managing director of consultancy firm Realise Performance, agreed that retention strategies in aged care should emphasise a positive organisational culture and career pathways, especially for younger workers.

"It's all about culture," he told AAA. "When staff feel they are valued and recognised and there is a culture of appreciation, then that supports retention."

This meant engaging with staff and recognising the contribution that they make to the organisation and to clients. Staff that feel undervalued will soon look for opportunities elsewhere, Mr Westacott said.



Chris Westacott

Dr Radford's research also supported the importance of developing a culture of rewards and recognition. "Being appreciated and valued and knowing how staff contribute to the organisation's aims is really important, especially as the industry becomes more competitive," she said.

An extended version of this report appears in the current issue of Australian Ageing Agenda magazine (Jan-Feb 2016).

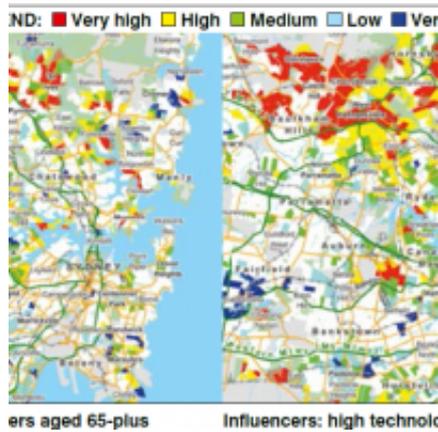
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