



Applying organisational behaviour theories to improve rural allied health recruitment and retention

Christine Challis, Principal Physiotherapist, Community Health Services Group, Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania

It is well documented that Australia is experiencing health workforce shortages, including in the allied health professions. Developing technologies, an ageing population and growing consumer expectations have all contributed to an increased demand for health services. Workforce shortages are even more acute in rural and remote areas. It is not uncommon to have chronic allied health vacancies in regional Australia.

This paper uses well established organisational behaviour theories to provide insights into employee job satisfaction, so that rural and remote allied health managers might apply them to their organisations and positions, to better enable the recruitment of new staff and retention of current staff.

This paper is also written in the context of Tasmania, where some unique allied health workforce issues apply, compared to other parts of Australia.

Recruitment into any available job is based on 4 key factors; perceived future job satisfaction, the transaction cost of shifting to a new job versus the opportunity cost of not shifting, lifestyle factors and personal factors including spouse and family. Given that 64% of Australians live in capital cities¹, luring a job applicant to regional Australia can be a difficult task. Rural jobs must be able to compete in the marketplace, that is, must be at least equal to city jobs in terms of job satisfaction. It is not enough to just offer a 'rural lifestyle' as an employment incentive, as the 'value' of lifestyle is perceived differently by different age groups.

In addition, recruiting and retaining a rural allied health workforce in Tasmania is also affected by:

- ▷ competition from a global marketplace for allied health workers
- ▷ competition from other industry sectors e.g. fitness, 'wellness', health administration
- ▷ a lack of allied health clinical schools—with the exception of social work and pharmacy. Tasmania's workforce is heavily sourced from the mainland
- ▷ a dispersed and decentralised population with some remote areas²
- ▷ a paucity of Federal initiatives for allied health (which apply to the medical, nursing and pharmacy workforce) to help correct rural workforce mal-distribution and other issues
- ▷ state based registration boards, which present yet another barrier in cross border recruitment
- ▷ limited access to supporting health workers and other health professions at many sites
- ▷ less accessible professional development. With most clinical schools and education programs based on the mainland Tasmania's workforce must travel across Bass Strait!
- ▷ generalised rural issues of restricted educational, employment, lower housing standards and potential social isolation.

It is important to remember that when recruiting, you are not just filling a vacancy. You should be matching a person with the right skills for the job and for organisational fit. This should result in higher levels of job satisfaction, leading in turn to a happy, motivated and productive workforce. High employee turnover rates are symptomatic of job dissatisfaction and are costly to employers and disruptive to communities.

I believe there are three key **managerial approaches** which impact heavily on the recruitment and retention of the workforce.





- ▷ Management skills, and in particular negotiation skills, are a key success factor in recruitment. For a rural manager, this may be the 'point of difference' between the applicants selecting a rural job over some other position. Rural managers must maintain a positive relationship with applicants during the recruitment process e.g. by being timely with responses. They must demonstrate a desire to further the relationship with the applicant and his or her family, by a preparedness to negotiate and discuss elements involved in the process. They must 'sell' the benefits of such jobs with a focus on the high levels of job satisfaction accompanying them. The process should be aggressive but appropriate.
- ▷ Managers should aim to remove elements of dissatisfaction from their positions and the organisational environment which creates them.
- ▷ Managers need to review and then be innovative in offering jobs that are intrinsically satisfying. Jobs which are highly satisfying have a greater chance of meeting the expectations of most applicants. Success in meeting expectations will lead to staff retention as opposed to resignations and high turnover rates.

How do allied health employers provide jobs which satisfy?

A major organisational behaviour theory emerged in the 1960s and 1970s by Herzberg^{3,4} which has become the gold standard on the topic of job satisfaction. Herzberg et al studied the sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in groups of professional employees.

They found that there were two elements about any job; one which determined job satisfaction and the other determining job dissatisfaction. Interestingly, they also found that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not opposites of the same experience but are two separate events.

It appeared that job dissatisfaction was linked to factors outside the job itself that is, the extrinsic or job context factors. Herzberg called these 'hygiene' factors. Job satisfaction was linked to the intrinsic nature of the job, that is, the job content. Herzberg called these factors 'motivators'.

He found that some common determinants of dissatisfaction are; personal relationships in the workplace, working conditions, salary, management, supervision, status and job security. Job satisfiers were found to be; job complexity, sense of achievement, recognition, degree of responsibility, promotional opportunity and personal growth.

Herzberg's theory says that to gain job satisfaction, a manager should remove the dissatisfaction elements first, then, stimulate the development of motivating influences.

It also follows from this theory that "if the capacity to motivate is not inherent in the work, no hygiene factor will compensate for it".⁵

Using these theories, I recommend that rural health managers involved in recruitment should critically analyse the way their organisation presents itself, in terms of the dissatisfaction elements mentioned above, and aim to correct their influence. Quick conflict resolution, flexible hours and work life balance, appropriate management structures, supportive organisational cultures, simplistic policies, a modern physical environment and competitive salaries are areas of importance for today's workforce in order to be competitive in recruitment and retention.⁶

Secondly, rural health managers should review all of their job/positions, whether filled or unfilled, to determine how satisfying they really are to current and future staff. A 'reality check' against many rural positions may indicate that some of these positions are not very attractive in terms of job complexity, that is they may be highly repetitive and narrow on task diversity, limited in terms of exposure to other people and environments and may present as too simple in a highly competitive market. "Job complexity is the strongest predictor of job satisfaction".⁷ Today's workforce requires mentally challenging work, frequent performance feedback, acknowledgement for positive contributions and welcomes the delegation of responsibilities. The challenge is to enrich rural jobs so that they can intrinsically satisfy and be competitive against other jobs in the market.

In summary, the message to rural managers is that you are the 'point of difference' in recruitment and retention in terms of giving your organisation a competitive edge. Review your organisational culture and its interface with current and potential employees—aim to improve it and remove things which are known to be dissatisfying to the workforce. Improve and enrich your jobs, make them more interesting and diverse so that they are truly satisfying in nature. This





way they can stand up to intense competition from metropolitan jobs. Prepare to negotiate during the recruitment process demonstrating your desire to maintain a strong relationship with the candidates.

References

1. Salt B. The big shift. South Yarra: Hardie Grant, 2004.
2. Bureau of Rural Sciences. Country matters: interactive social atlas of rural and regional Australia. Canberra; BRS, 2004.
3. Herzberg F. Work and the nature of man. Cleveland: World 1966.
4. Herzberg F. The managerial choice; to be efficient and to be human. Homewood: Dow Jones-Irwin, 1976.
5. Knowles M. Organisational behaviour: changing concepts and applications. Artarmon: Harper & Row, 1990.
6. Moloney, K. www.skillswithpeople.com.au
7. Gerhart B. How important are dispositional factors as determinants of job satisfaction? Implications for job design and other personnel programs. J Applied Psychology 1987, 72,3:366–373.

