AOSIS

A critical reflection on the psychology of retention

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Introduction

For more than a century both researchers and employers have been interested in understanding the reasons as to why employees leave their organisations (Eberle, 1919; Heffernan & Rochford, 2017). Fisher (1916), one of the first researchers to investigate 'undesirable labour turnover', argued that losing 'hard working labourers' results in significant financial losses for a company and that 'the satisfaction of the employee […] brings best results'. Although employee needs have become more sophisticated, the nature of work is different, organisations are more dynamic and the view of labour has changed since 1916, the fundamental principle is still the same: For an organisation to perform, it needs to retain top talent (Redelinghuys, Rothmann, & Botha, 2018).

In spite of scholarly endeavours in the last 110 years or so to understand why individuals leave, researchers are still perplexed as to the universal, psychological principles or conditions that lead to this phenomenon. This is evident in the upsurge of research on turnover intentions and talent retention interventions during the past decade (Hancock, Allen, Bosco, McDaniel, & Pierce, 2013). Although some fundamental principles underpinning retention is evident (e.g. people leave organisations, not managers), the dynamic changes in the nature of work, digitisation, Industry 4.0 and continued focus on the future world of work poses new challenges for organisations to retain top talent. Although increasing an employee's hourly wage, allowing for opportunities to rotate jobs and providing lunch were effective ways to retain talent a century ago (Eberle, 1919), the same strategies would not be effective today. Similarly, merely investing in the professional development of employees, creating a positive working climate and creating a clear career path – which are contemporary retention strategies – are not enough to retain talented millennials today (Cassell, 2017). As such, new talent retention approaches are needed to ensure that organisations are equipped to manage the challenges of tomorrow.

In the edited volume, *Psychology of Retention: Theory, Research and Practice*, by Coetzee, Potgieter and Ferreira (2018), the authors attempt to collectively construct a multidimensional, psychological model aimed at understanding, predicting and managing employee retention within the current volatile work-environment (Figure 1.). Through the course of 20 chapters, the authors systematically unpack the individual, group, organisational and contextual factors influencing and attributing to the retention of talent within the modalities of contemporary organisational contexts.

General overview and critical reflection

The book positions the psychology of retention as a function of six inter-related factors: (1) an appropriate evaluative paradigm through which retention is explored, (2) retention as a function of environmental/contextual factors, (3) organisational processes, practices and dynamics that influence turnover intentions, (4) individual characteristics that buffer or affect retention, (5) the dynamic relationship between the individual and the organisation and (6) the conscious efforts organisations employ to practically affect retention of top talent. These inter-related retention factors are systematically addressed throughout the six sections of the book.

In Part 1 of the manuscript, Roodt argues that the classical job-demands, job-resources (JDR) model is an effective means through which to diagnose, interpret and manage the psychological attributes that account for turnover intentions. In Chapter 1, Roodt populates the JDR model with contemporary factors known to affect the retention of staff and argues that retention is a function of the dynamic relationship between the person and his/her environment. Veldsman expands
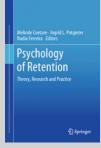
Source: Coetzee, M., Potgieter, I., & Ferreira, N. (2018). *Psychology of retention: Theory, research and practice*. Zurich, Switzerland: Springer Nature.
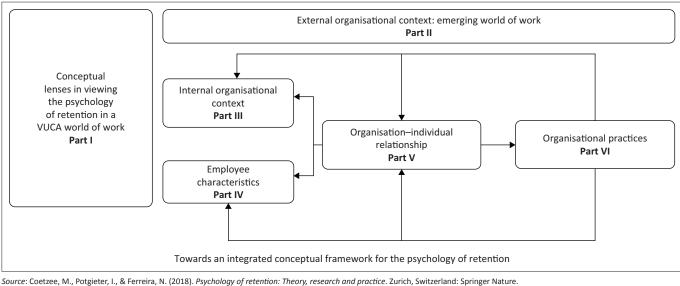FIGURE 1: Coetzee et al.'s (2018) conceptual framework for the psychology of retention in a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA).

upon this idea in Chapter 2, whereby he argues that retention is influenced by the extent to which an individual is psychologically immerged in his/her work. He argues, in contrast to Roodt, that retention is not only affected by job demands/resources but also by 'people effectiveness enablers' (e.g. manager credibility, appreciative feedback, strategic connection, intra-team effectiveness, an enabling environment, congruencies) and the psychological attachment to work roles. Although the author presents these enablers as contemporary attributing factors to retention, these are merely a consortium of well-known antecedents of retention drawn from the positive organisational scholarship literature, packaged in a proverbial 'new jacket'. The value of Chapter 2 does not lie in the identification of the antecedents, but rather on the unique approach towards aiding individuals to psychologically attach to work. He further presents the effectiveness of the model against the backdrop of two case studies.

Part 2 aims to understand the extent to which the external environment affects the recruitment and retention of talent. In Chapter 3, Ludike presents an argument as to the effect digitisation and the Gig economy has on attracting, recruiting and retaining talent. He presents a number of factors which he believes will affect the way in which talent will be sourced, and the factors which will influence retention in the future world of work. This chapter collates well-known approaches and ideas of 'futuring' thought-leaders but does not add any additional insights to what is already widely accepted. This chapter attempts to sketch a picture of what the future world of work 'will' look like, but merely describes already established, contemporary views on the 'current world of work'. Chapter 3 provides a good summary of McGovern's (2017) and Meister and Willyerd's (2010) pop-management manuscripts but adds little to the debate on the current or future world of work and the challenges organisations will face regarding the retention of staff in the era of robotics, electronic Human Resource Management (e-HRM) and

smart industries. However, where Chapter 3 falls short, Chapter 4 compensates. In Chapter 4, Veldsman and Pauw combine the works of Browne (2012) and Frow and Payne (2011) on the employee value proposition (EVP), and theories on the psychological contract, into an innovative model of attracting and retaining talent for the future world of work. The authors present practical guidelines on how organisations should craft a clear EVP to attract and retain talent, borrowing key principles from contemporary scientific and pop-management literature. Although this chapter is innovative, it's clear that it's a consulting firm's 'product'. The novelty of the content is undermined by the lack of a thorough theoretical discussion in support of the construction of MMI Holdings Limited's EVP. Both chapters in Part 2 should be interpreted as practitioner-focused views and utilised as practice guidelines, rather than unique contributions to the discipline.

Part 3 centres around the tenet that organisational factors (e.g. job demands/resources, culture and climate) influence the retention of employees. Chapter 5 presents Holtom and Darabi's ideas around how job embeddedness influences individuals' intention to stay. They argue that individuals who are embedded within an organisation are more likely to stay, as it aids in tying individual identities to organisational goals. They further argue that retention is a function of social contagion, whereby employee attitudes are influenced by the behaviour of team members, co-workers and other important social relationships. Finally, they indicate that job embeddedness is a better predictor of turnover intentions than job satisfaction. The chapter makes valuable contributions to the understanding of retention from a social–psychology perspective, through highlighting the impact which person–organisation fit has on retention. Chapter 6 draws upon this idea and argues that job demands and resources, and person–job fit are significant predictors of turnover intentions. Although this relationship is relatively well established within the literature (see Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), De Beer, Scholtz and Rothmann argues that this may differ from administrative to professional

personnel. This relationship was again established within their study, but with two (not four as argued in text) unique differences between the groups. Firstly, they found that emotional load and work overload predicted much higher turnover intentions in administrative employees than in professional employees. Secondly, they also found that communication practices are more important for professional employees' turnover intentions than with the administrative group. These are important criteria to consider when organisations would like to implement retention strategies. Although these two contributions are unique, it's important to understand that there are non-significant differences in the overall models between the two groups. Further, given the sample size of 745, and the 705 degrees of freedom, the results of this study should be taken with a proverbial grain of salt. Rothmann and Fouché in Chapter 7 investigates the role of the school principle in satisfying the basic psychological needs of employees (autonomy, competence and relatedness) and the impact thereof on work engagement and turnover intentions. The results of the study are in line with previously established assumptions about the role of the manager in the well-being of employees. The unique contribution of this article lies in the fact that only the autonomy which principles provided to teachers directly influenced turnover intentions. The authors present a thorough argument as to why this is the case. Albeit a thorough study, it leaves the reader wondering as to why a bi-factor or hierarchal bi-factor model for psychological need satisfaction was not assessed. This may have aided in explaining more variance in work engagement and turnover intentions. Finally, Coetzee and Van Dyk aimed to explain the effect of workplace bullying on turnover intentions in Chapter 8. The results of this chapter show that work engagement and hardiness commitment are key factors that affect turnover intentions, whereas workplace bullying clearly distracts from such. The results imply that if organisations are to condone workplace bullying (either consciously or implicitly), they may actively affect individuals' turnover intentions. The unique contribution of this chapter lays in the multidimensional approach towards understanding retention through focusing on both the attributing and distracting factors.

In contrast, Part 4 focuses on both the inter- and intra-psychological facets of employees which impacts on turnover intentions. Firstly, Potgieter constructs a theoretical framework for the individual's personal characteristics or factors which is associated with talent retention. She argues in Chapter 9 that talent retention is a function of an interplay between employee's self-esteem, career adaptability, employability attributes and organisational commitment. She further provides practical guidelines for managing these from both an individual and an interpersonal perspective. Although there are many other individual factors that may impact turnover intentions (e.g. the personal resources which Roodt mentions in Chapter 1), Potgieter provides a thorough argument in support of the construction of her framework. However, her model does not fully unpack the interpersonal factors and substantiate the choice thereof. This is where Chapter 10 seems to fill a void. Kostanek and Khoreva

address one of the major interpersonal factors that influence turnover intentions: 'generational theory'. They argue that each generation has certain values, norms, needs, desires and are motivated through different means. They present separate talent retention strategies for each generational cohort with practical guidelines on how organisations can immediately implement such. Although their chapter is quite thorough in its attempt to address each cohort in isolation, the modern workplace is filled with a multitude of different generations. In the current chapter, the authors did not attempt to provide a holistic, integrated retention framework for managing the multi-generational organisation. Furthermore, Chapter 11 seems to conceptually build upon the ideas of Potgieter, through arguing that self-regulatory career behaviours are a major retention factor which organisations need to take heed of. She provides practical guidelines and suggested organisational interventions to manage retention from this perspective. As an extension of Potgieter's chapter, Ferreira builds a systematic and holistic framework for the career-related factors that may affect retention. The pre-final chapter in this section seems to be out of place and does not effectively contribute to the narrative on retention from an individual characteristics perspective. In Chapter 12, Takawira attempts to investigate the career development of professionals and specifically looks at the relationship between a number of demographic characteristics and career satisfaction. This chapter does not provide any insights into the retention of female professionals. The focus is on understanding the attributing factors to career satisfaction, with just a footnote on potential implications for retention. Although this may have been a valuable study on its own, the link with retention is not clearly established or argued but is rather seen as a 'potential' by-product of career satisfaction (which is never assessed nor established within the current chapter). The final chapter in this section, Chapter 13, provides a really unique view on retention: The retention of older people in civil society organisations. Through the lens of gerontology, Serrat, Villar and Celdran explore the factors that may influence older generations' retention to civil society organisations through a systematic literature review. The chapter systematically constructs a conceptual framework for the factors associated with the retention of the elderly in these organisations. They identified various means, motives and organisational factors that may impact older individuals' willingness to continue engagement with civil society organisations.

Whereas Parts 3 and 4 attempted to approach retention from an organisational and individual perspective, Part 5 attempts to argue that retention is a function of the interplay between the expectations of both parties. In the first chapter in this section, Chapter 14, Anggraeni argues that retention of millennials depends upon the nature of the social or psychological contract. Millennials have a particular set of expectations which organisations need to address in order to ensure that they not only perform but are also retained. In line with the general trend of the book, this chapter also provides practical guidelines on how to manage the

millennial with a particular focus on career development initiatives and mentoring. Although this chapter focuses on the needs of the millennial, it's important to note that the psychological contract has two stakeholders: the millennial and the organisation. Although an extensive overview is presented as to one factor which may aid in retaining millennials, it's important to note that organisational expectations are also an important factor to consider. This is where Chapter 15 makes a significant contribution. Zupan et al. argue that the psychological contract is a dynamic agreement between the millennial and the employer. In their study, they investigated the anticipatory psychological contract between potential employees (students) and employers and found that a high overlap in expectations exists. They argued that development opportunities and marketability is important for both parties; however, having a realistic job overview during the recruitment phase is important for students. Students tend to expect more stability and loyalty from an employer, yet are not willing to present the same. This study makes a significant contribution in relation to the expectations between employer and potential employee. The final chapter in this section draws together key findings from the previous section (Chapters 9 and 11) and positions them in line with the diversity theory. Deas argues in Chapter 16 that various diversity-related aspects could theoretically impact on turnover intentions through violations of the psychological contract. In her comprehensive study on the relationship between these variables, she found significant differences between various demographic variables and psychological contract expectations. Her results provide evidence that individual talents should be managed differently, if organisations desire to retain them in the long term.

The final part of this book, Part 6, is positioned to review four contemporary approaches which organisations could, would and should employ to retain top talent. In Chapter 17, a case is made for the relationship between components of work ethics and organisational commitment as functions of retention. Mitonga-Monga explains that higher work ethics is associated with higher levels of organisational commitment. Although this is an interesting finding, a stronger argument as to the function thereof as a retention mechanism was expected. The theoretical relationship between these variables is merely implied and not thoroughly explored. Seeing that retention is not specifically measured, it would be a logical conclusion that the aforementioned link be clearly unpacked. In Chapter 18, Naim approaches retention as a result of formal mentoring within organisations. Similar to a chapter in the previous section, the author argues that mentorship is an imperative (and formally underutilised) instrument which organisations could capitalise on to aid millennials to grow

and develop… and as such enhance their commitment and retain them for longer in the process. Bussin in contrast argues, in Chapter 19, that remuneration also plays a significant role in the retention of top talent. Here, he argues that different types of reward strategies are linked to retention, and that the 'right' strategies need to be employed, at the right time, for the right individual to be impactful. A customised total rewards system/strategy needs to be developed and implemented in order to ensure that talent is retained. Facets of such is quantified and confirmed in Chapter 20 by Mabaso.

Overall impression and conclusion

In this edited volume, Coetzee et al. managed to provide a holistic, contemporary overview of the psychological aspects affecting the retention of employees. They presented a conceptual framework for such, populated by the work of scholars from across the globe. Not only do the different parts logically build towards a conceptual framework for retention but the individual chapters also logically follow up on and complement each other through the manuscript. Weighing up both the critiques and contributions of the book, it is quite evident that as a compiled work, the *Psychology of Retention: Theory, Research and Practice*, makes a significant scientific and practical contribution to the field. This book is truly recommended as a science-practitioner-friendly manuscript which advances both science and practice.

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