This article explores staff retention against a backdrop of economic and social changes related to the non-profit sector in Ireland. Staff retention may be strongly influenced by their belief in the mission. It may be due to the fact that there are few alternative opportunities available. Or there may be practices that support workers to keep going, despite an uncertain funding environment and unrelenting human needs. This article seeks to identify contextual factors, such as organisational culture, leadership approach and personnel policies that play a role in retaining Project Workers in homeless services.

Personal experience of the challenges within the sector such as short-term contracts, reduced hours, fewer monetary rewards and burnout is a feature of the career of many non-profit workers. Professionally as a manager and having worked in the non-profit sector for more than ten years, I seek to understand what motivates workers despite those challenges, and the positive role that employers can play in keeping staff satisfied at work and motivated to continue. In organisations that address human needs with values of equality and justice, I aim to understand how these values play out at work for staff.

The main conclusions of the research are:

- **Mission attachment:** The principle source of motivation for those interviewed is assisting clients, in line with organisational mission. This does not weaken over time suggesting that mission attachment is sustained when workers become more invested in and knowledgeable about their work. An ability to continually deliver this service in line with the ‘big picture’ vision of their work was clear. However, although non-profit staff are primarily motivated by mission, they feel frustrated when pay or other benefits are lessened. Furthermore, they may feel unable to speak out based on an assumption that such factors are less important to them, and that they will continue to carry out the role regardless of conditions.

- **Workplace stress:** Stress came in many guises among those interviewed. Non Profit organisations are under pressure to be financially accountable leading to more paperwork, to cater for increasing demand among clients, and are more at risk on-the-job due to higher levels of violence.

- **Communication:** Staff interpret their experience at work through their relationships with colleagues and managers. In a challenging environment, workers depend on relationships which are genuine and trusting to give them a measure of security in their role. Project Workers have a close relationship with their direct line manager but organisations with multi-tiered structures risk alienating those with front-line experience from those who make strategic decisions, damaging levels of trust in executive decisions.
• **Management Style:** Workers are anxious about organisational decisions being weighted in favour of a business agenda rather than the social mission. Finding a balance between business and social values impacts how staff and clients are treated by the organisation, and perhaps more importantly, how they perceive that treatment. In addition, policies are important in formalising an organisation’s commitment to its staff, which is not simply the whim of an individual leader.

• **Work design:** Workers enjoy having a variety of objectives in their role, beyond the front-line work with clients. They feel motivated and valued by opportunities to further their own skills and take on different types of responsibility. Organisational practices which demonstrate management’s recognition of employee contributions are crucial whether through supervision, performance appraisal or other Human Resource policies.

**Methodology**

This research methodology is based on six one-off interviews during summer 2014 with full-time Project Workers in homelessness prevention. To explore factors influencing employee retention in non-profit organisations, semi-structured interviews were used based on the following questions:

- What do individual staff members value about their employers and workplace?
- What does a positive work environment look like on a day-to-day basis?
- What is the role that leaders and managers can play in creating this?
- Which personnel policies contribute to employee satisfaction, motivation and retention?

For this study, participants were sought who:

- Were employed in a non-profit organisation working with homeless people
- Worked as a Project Worker or similar (i.e. not in senior management);
- Had been working in the organisation for three years minimum;
- Had worked in an organisation that has a human resource structure in place (i.e. an individual/team responsible for human resource management).

The six organisations and profile of the interviewees are set out in Table 1, yet there is no direct link between the order of the organisations (1-6) and that of the interviewees (A-F), in order to promote confidentiality.

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<th>Table 1 Profile of research participants</th>
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<td>Interviewees’ roles</td>
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While the scale of this type of research means that it may not be possible to generalise, findings can be indicative if not conclusive (Kinnie et al., 2005) and may be relevant for other organisations working with homeless people, as well as in the Community and Voluntary sector more broadly.

**Literature Review**

**The ‘Homeless’ sub-sector and its workforce**

The non-profit sector in Ireland is experiencing difficulty given the current financial climate and continued government cuts to the sector since 2008 which were down a further 3% in Budget 2014 (The Wheel, 2013). Results of this financial pressure are widely visible as organisations seek to downsize, decrease the payroll, encourage unpaid leave and hire freelance workers in order to bring down costs (Harvey, 2012; Bolman and Deal 2008). Several researchers suggest that non-profit organisations are becoming more business-like, more market-driven and more likely to hire people with business degrees to handle the pressure associated with resource shortages (LeRoux and Feeney, 2013; Jäger et al., 2012).

Within the non-profit sector, organisations working with homeless people have been referred to as a ‘homeless sub-sector’ by Harvey (Homeless Agency, 2008a:14), characterised by a number of large agencies such as Focus Ireland and Simon Communities. The 2011 census reported 3,808 homeless people, with 2,375 of those in Dublin (CSO, 2012). Following the economic crisis numbers of people experiencing homelessness have grown, for instance, in 2010 demand on the Society of St Vincent de Paul rose 50% (Harvey, 2012:25).

Non-profit staff is seen as motivated in distinctive ways when compared to workers in other sectors through greater commitment, stronger non-monetary orientation and greater degrees of altruism to serve others (Jäger et al. (2012) and Bassous (2014)). The strong mission attachment among staff has led conventional wisdom to assume that they are seen as willing to work for lower salaries and fewer benefits because they associate so strongly with the organisational goals (Bassous, 2014; Benz, 2005). However, in a time of recession, non-profit organisations are faced with the dilemma of cutting back...
on terms and conditions, while at the same time relying more than ever on dedicated staff to deal with increasing demand.

“A lot of voluntary employers seem to think that because the social purpose of the organisation is so laudable, that people ought not to fuss about their salaries, their working conditions and other issues” (Cunningham, 2001:236).

In addition, spending more time on paperwork as part of ‘contractor accountability’ leads to a situation where front-line staff have less time to carry out the role they were hired to do (Cunningham, 2001).

Motivational Theory

The literature demonstrates that non-profit organisations have a powerful head-start in attracting workers who strongly identify with their mission. Yet “the psychology of motivation is tremendously complex” (Herzberg, 1968:5) and various theorists have attempted to understand it. Herzberg’s dual-factor theory is important as it indicates that high levels of satisfaction can be attained by ensuring personal growth through tasks (‘intrinsic factors’), whilst maintaining ‘extrinsic factors’ of pay and working conditions at acceptable standards (Bassous, 2014; Gunnigle et al., 2011). Given the distinctive nature of non-profit workplaces, intrinsic factors linked to ‘job enrichment’ and doing meaningful work can also play an important role in staff retention in the sector.

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture takes into account many different aspects including identity, communication patterns, relationships, risk-taking and management support (Morley et al., 2004) and helps us to understand how social mission and values translate into daily life for staff. Bassous’ research (2014) demonstrates that the link between organisational culture and staff motivation levels is one of the strongest compared to other variables such as salary, faith and serving the mission. A positive organisational culture contributes towards a sense of community, and strong communication provides a forum for staff to feel listened to, and to understand the ‘big picture’ of where their work sits in the wider context (Ban et al., 2003).

The Role of Managers in Staff Retention

Given staff centrality to the success of non-profit organisations, leaders have significant responsibility in their as representatives of organisational culture and in supervising work. From the literature, several desirable characteristics stand out. Kouzes and Posner (2012) find that the top four characteristics sought in leaders have been consistent since 1987: honest, forward-looking, competent and inspiring. In addition, workers want leaders who have vision for the organisation, show passion in their role and develop trust through relationships (Bolman and Deal, 2008). Workers want leaders who base their management on ‘credibility’ which Kouzes and Posner (2012:40) sum up as simply “do what you say you will do”. This echoes how workers experience organisational protocol:

“Employee attitudes are influenced not so much by the way these policies are intended to operate as by the way they are actually implemented by line managers” (Kinnie et al., 2005:10).

Organisational Policies

In addition to the managers implementing them, the actual Human Resources (HR) policies themselves are important influences on staff retention. Valuing staff through employment conditions can include monetary and non-monetary rewards in the form benefits such as career breaks, funds for education, and flexible working hours.

Staff awards sometimes form part of formal accreditation or ‘benchmarking’ systems such as ‘Great Place to Work’ (www.greatplacetowork.ie) and ‘Excellence through People’ which Dublin Simon Community have achieved (NSAI, 2012).

Staff learning is another core aspect of organisational competitiveness, as well as career progression (Gunnigle et al., 2011). However it is not always straightforward for non-profit workers to progress and “third-sector employees pursue a career that is not in line with the conventional career model” according to Onyx and Maclean (1996) because they do not simply move up the organisational hierarchy (Jäger et al., 2012).

Findings

The current context of the homeless sub-sector and its workforce

The current economic climate in the country was something which was very prevalent in the minds of those interviewed, in terms of increasing needs of clients, further demands on services and negative impacts on employment terms and conditions. Staff interviewed felt in some cases that there was an expectation that staff could do more with less, and it was assumed that pay and conditions were not as important to them.

“Sometimes it’s seen as, ‘well you’ve a caring personality so just get on with it’. Well it takes a bit more than a caring personality.” (Interview D)

Staff perceived a shift in approach by organisations, to what one interviewee described as becoming more business-like (Interview F). This influenced opinions about senior management, especially when implementing cuts, taking decisions about the direction of the service and whether staff trusted them to act in line with the organisational ethos (Interview A). Interviewees also reported more administrative tasks within their day-to-day role. Relying on mission attachment alone to motivate staff – at the expense of terms and conditions and work tasks – may be ill-advised when “the link
between their work and the mission has become weaker because of the loss of time to provide services as a result of excessive workload” (Kim and Lee, 2007:241).

**Staff Motivation in Homeless Services**

For all those interviewed, the centrality of the client and improving outcomes for them was of paramount importance.

“So the contact with the clients that’s what motivates me. Seeing people change, seeing people get what they want and achieve their goals, that motivates me.” (Interview E)

Another finding which came through strongly in the interviews was how much staff valued not only doing things well, but seeking to improve their practice and the service as a whole. And although workers have difficult caseloads and an intense working environment, they want to connect with the overall vision for their work:

“Are we doing the best we can with that money? Is this the best service that it can be?” (Interview F)

Yet, belief in the overall mission cannot mitigate all difficulties posed by the work, especially when working in a low-threshold, high-stress environment.

“It has now become very apparent here that the management are putting the staff first, because if you don’t look after staff well then you can’t provide a service….. You’re constantly playing with – who’s more important, the staff or service?” (Interview A)

Such strong commitment to helping clients comes at a significant personal cost caused by “burn-out”.

“I’m 33 years of age and I’ve been here an incredibly long time for me. It’s too young to be burnt-out I think”. (Interview A)

The interviewees reiterated the fundamental motivation of providing assistance to the clients they work with. This reflects the wealth of literature highlighting non-profit workers’ particular attachment to mission and the fact that they are also the main asset in achieving it (Kim and Lee, 2007; Watson and Abzug, 2005).

**Work Environment and Organisational Culture**

One of the main themes emerging from the findings is the chaotic working environment that all interviewees named as a defining feature of their work encompassing uncertainty within the sector, and the turmoil associated with homeless services.

“It’s chaotic in the sense that it’s work that you never know what you could get. Any day that I come through the door, I don’t know how the project has been, even though I’ve been here the previous day. And that’s something that you cannot really say in many workplaces.” (Interview B)

This stressful environment is further exacerbated by the risks involved in working with people actively using drugs and alcohol which leads to challenging behaviour and violence, sometimes even directed at staff:

“A guy had been excluded and for some reason he just took it out on me... I opened up the door to the street and he just boxed me straight in the face.” (Interview D)

Given the negative aspects of the working environment, coping strategies are a crucial aspect of daily work. The six interviewees highlighted teamwork, particularly relying on other colleagues, through daily contact, team meetings and responding to incidents as crucial. A word that came up again and again was trust; having that special understanding with members of your team:

“In my opinion you need to know your colleagues and have a special connection. You need to know if at certain points your colleague is going to respond the way they should, and the way you need.” (Interview B)

In addition, interviewees referred a lot to “self-care” in protecting themselves in the role. While staff cannot always control what happens in a volatile environment, they emphasised time management, and leaving work “at work” in trying to practice work-life balance.

“You can’t get to the point where you feel you’re over-needed and therefore you can’t take a break... Take your break and when it comes to the end of your shift, just go home.... That might seem obvious, but it’s not. It’s a habit.” (Interview D)

**Role of Management**

All interviewees referred to the important role of management in their working lives, both in the form of their immediate supervisor, as well as senior management. In all cases the supervisor was the closest representative of organisational leadership in the workers’ lives and usually their principle channel to have a say in both day-to-day issues and the overall direction of the organisation. Supervision allows staff to express dissatisfaction or doubts, reflect on their own development and receive direct feedback on performance.

“Supervision... 50% is about the work and your performance. The second part is purely like an emotional sort of think-tank for yourself in the sense of self-development... You need to shut that door and ask the worker ‘well, are you happy here?’” (Interview D)

In many cases, line managers had an important role to play in determining work tasks. The interviewees placed a huge value on having meaningful work, in terms of taking on responsibility and growing in their roles, including beyond direct work with clients.

“You know, writing policies is something that I never would have been involved in, but I have been involved
Alongside new tasks, staff valued role clarity, which greatly contributed to satisfaction, in that they knew what is expected of them and felt they could successfully fulfil that role, particularly important given the unpredictable and stressful environments they work in.

“We know what we need to do and the reason why, how everybody links with each other… Where this fits in as a service and how I fit in as a worker.” (Interview B)

While contact with line managers was wholly positive, interviewees had different attitudes towards senior management. For some interviewees, trust was strengthened through access to senior management:

“The CEO met with me and another worker and he said that we’d done our time, that he understood how difficult it was and we would get to move [to another project].” (Interview E)

Others felt that senior management were authentic and reflected the values they preached:

“Management reflect that servant leadership, by the way that they set up their projects, and the way that they recruit staff.” (Interview D)

However, others felt a distance between senior management and the day-to-day reality, sometimes in the form of physical distance which became a barrier to a strong connection with senior management.

“But I actually don’t think sometimes that head offices realise the work that’s being done in local areas to keep things up and running.” (Interview E)

The major debate that emerged relating to management was the skills they needed to have in order to successfully lead homeless services - direct experience as a Project Worker or an external perspective coming from the private sector.

“You’d have to have the experience of actually being someone’s key worker. You have to have worked on the ground before you take that [management] position, so that you’re aware.” (Interview C)

“If I was an area manager, I’m not dealing with clients... You need a good bit of management skills, training, and qualifications. So I do definitely think we need a mix.” (Interview F)

A related issue arose with regard to remuneration of senior management which could undermine workers’ confidence in their motivation. Such statements were not necessarily reflective of the organisations the interviewees worked for, but staff perceptions of high salaries and an encroaching business ethos in the non-profit sector indicate a lack of trust in sectoral leadership.

“It is a business as much as anything else. There are people on quite high wages in the sector, whereas the majority of people are on in or around the industrial wage.” (Interview F)

The role of leading the sector was important to several interviewees who wanted organisations to have a stronger voice in advocating for the needs they witness daily.

“What I would love would be for management to do that piece of advocacy for that client group that we work with.” (Interview A)

All six interviewees raised the role senior management play in decision-making. In particular, workers were wary of situations where decisions were made by senior managers without consulting those with direct experience.

“And I think sometimes, in the past, the problem might have been that decisions were made by people sitting at a table who had no idea of the work that you tried to deliver and the service that you needed to provide for the client group.” (Interview A)

Other organisations created formal spaces to communicate with and consult staff, for instance through staff events, group supervision, surveys and staff representatives on management committees. However simply consulting staff was not enough. The process employed was as important and all tools could be used in either meaningful or tokenistic ways. Some structures such as general staff meetings became a means for the organisation to inform staff of issues rather than provide an opportunity to share opinions.

“The problem with that [meeting] is that it’s the executive telling everyone what has happened and there’s no input from staff as to what they would like to hear being discussed... It’s a very closed shop of ‘being told’. They give us information.” (Interview F)

Organisational Structures and Personnel Policies

When asked about which organisational policies facilitate their work, supervision was named again as crucial by five interviewees, particularly for providing feedback. Five staff was also involved in clear performance management systems and had annual appraisals which they saw as an important opportunity to monitor performance and take time to reflect on the overall purpose of their work.

More explicit appreciation of staff was mentioned in two organisations with staff award systems. While the prizes may not be significant, the symbolic display of appreciation was valued.

“We have an awards ceremony for particular things that are happening throughout the year. Personally I think it’s a very good way to reward people. There’s not really enough reward in this field.” (Interview D)
Where this acknowledgement was less structured, there was a risk of it not happening at all.

“The credit doesn’t always filter down, apart from a generic: ‘You’re all doing a wonderful job’.” (Interview F)

While all organisations had a Human Resources (HR) department in place, interviewees’ perceptions of it were mixed. Some associated contact with HR as very beneficial, such as through the provision of free counselling to staff:

“HR is very good as well. If you had your own issue, or you thought you might need a bit of counselling or something, there’s no problem ringing there and they will organise something for you.” (Interview C)

While others felt that HR prioritised the organisation rather than the staff:

“A lot of times, the perception of HR – and it certainly would have been mine – is that they’re there to protect the organisation as opposed to do anything for the employees.” (Interview F)

Access to learning opportunities was also referred to by all interviewed, including training courses, taking on greater responsibility, liaising with other services and, in some cases, progressing up the career ladder. Outside of formal training, interviewees also commented on the possibility of learning on-the-job through new challenges, meaning that an organisation should not rely solely on formal courses to provide stimulation and motivation for Project Workers:

“When the complicated cases come in, they’re happy. … If they don’t know everything about a case, they’d be bringing it to someone maybe to get legal advice on it, and then that will increase their learning as well.” (Interview F)

Transfers within the organisation came up specifically when staff was asked about organisational policies which contribute to retention, as they guarded against burn-out. Also where career progression was identified as difficult, the ability to take on new responsibilities in the current role was all the more important. Taking a break from your role was also possible through taking unpaid leave or a sabbatical in several organisations.

“After three years’ service you can take a sabbatical. If I may say from a personal level, I think social work or social care work is a kind of a job where I think it’s healthy if you can take breaks from it.” (Interview D)

**Recommendations**

Human values and social missions should inform not only how clients accessing services are treated, but also how staff are managed. The research available reminds us that staff are key to the achievement of organisations’ missions, and satisfied staff will show commitment above and beyond their role.

- **Senior management need to embody the values of the organisation for staff.** This will greatly increase confidence in their ability, decisions made, and their role as ambassadors for the organisation and clients.
- **Contact with senior management should be regular and direct** with two-way communication channels so that staff can share their ideas and experience, and managers can be informed by the people who know the work best.
- **Organisations should formalise their commitment to staff through policies** which promote organisational acknowledgement of work done; a strong learning ethos; opportunities to develop, and a chance to celebrate the work.
- **Organisations need to facilitate workers’ desire to focus on the mission through work design** Management should prevent administrative overload of paperwork, and free up workers to fulfil their primary role with clients. Organisations need to protect the well-being of staff, and provide support to staff when overburdened by the demands of the role.
- **Collaboration between services should be increased in the area of advocacy** for clients and the homeless sector in general.

Above all, staff wish to feel valued and that their role appreciated. Organisations can encourage this by providing time and space to truly listen to staff, acknowledging workers for the tasks they carry out and supporting them when things are difficult, which is inevitable in a role characterised by challenging client behaviour and an uncertain funding environment. Policies should be in place to facilitate this, however the culture developed at work and the values lived by managers will do more to inform staff perceptions of their own value, significantly influencing their commitment to stay in their role. If organisations can integrate staff well-being into strategic planning and mission achievement, a fulfilled and motivated workforce will take care of the rest.
Bibliography


