People, perceptions and policies: public sector workforce alignment

by

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Declaration of originality

I declare that:

- this thesis presents work carried out by the candidate and does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and

- to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and all substantive contribution by others to the work, presented, including jointly authored publications, are clearly acknowledged.

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Abstract

Australian workplaces are experiencing substantial challenges because of population ageing. In addition, the labour market is highly competitive, so organisations need to offer competitive employment terms and conditions to attract, engage and retain talented employees. Paralleling this is evidence of the need for workplace flexibility, with organisations requiring greater structural flexibility to increase efficiencies and productivity, and individuals wanting flexible working arrangements for work-life balance. Literature indicates that different generations hold different expectations and aspirations about work.

Strategic Human Resource Management [SHRM] theory prescribes that organisations should align their workforces to meet organisational goals, with workforce policies determined by the senior executive. Literature addressing current workforce challenges is deficient in addressing public sector workforce management, particularly the different environment in which it exists and operates. This literature fails to recognise the importance and value of how managers’ and employees’ perceptions about their employment can contribute to determining appropriate workforce policies to achieve sustainable workforces.

The current research examined attraction, engagement and retention in public sector Agencies, using in-depth interviews with public sector employees and managers to record their perceptions about their employment prior to commencement and currently, and the factors influencing their ongoing service. A survey of public sector Agencies assessed the types and level of alignment of Human Resources [HR] practices and policies against the themes of attraction, engagement and retention.

The findings show that employees’ perceptions about their employment are more cohesive than the literature indicates. The need for job security, challenging work and community contribution were values shared by participants, but their interpretations varied. Employee results were compared with managers’ perceptions and the Agency survey findings to identify what attraction, engagement and retention factors are held to be valuable and whether there was an alignment with organisational policies and practices. The findings highlight the need for a considered organisational approach that incorporates employees’ and managers’ perceptions about their employment. The results contribute to understanding how public services can manage and sustain their workforces by developing appropriate HR practices and policies.
This study was unique in that it drew evidence from employees' and managers' perceptions about attraction, engagement and retention, and contrasted this with organisational policies and practices. The importance of informal flexible workplace arrangements was a key finding. The research adds to the emerging body of knowledge regarding workforce management, particularly how knowledge of employees' perceptions can contribute to building effective policies that meet individual and organisational needs.
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