

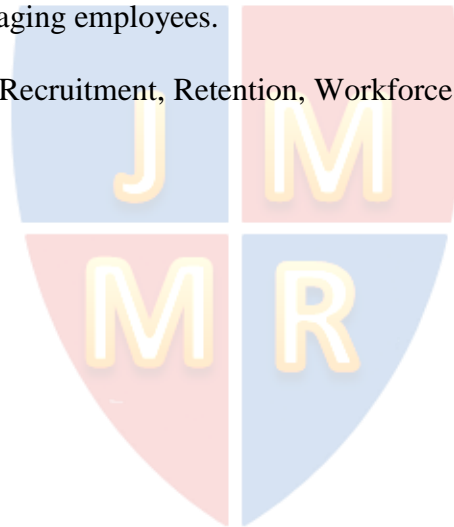
Grounded theory: Its use in recruitment and retention

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the methodology of grounded theory can assist researchers in expanding the knowledge and application of the human resource management practices of recruitment and retention beyond the bounds of traditional theories and methodologies. This paper encompasses research in which grounded theory, when applied to workforce management, provides insight into the challenges of recruiting and retaining healthcare professionals, specifically those in rural areas faced with obstacles not experienced in most urban settings. Through interviewing healthcare professionals, analyzing the collected data using grounded theory, and interpreting the results, organizations can gain a better understanding of the needs, wants, and demands of employees in the healthcare industry. Conclusions address the use and role of grounded theory in better understanding and managing employees.

Keywords: Grounded theory, Recruitment, Retention, Workforce management, Human resources management



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INTRODUCTION

Human resource professionals derive their practices from previously conducted research that has yielded numerous theories. Practitioners utilize those theories to implement strategies designed to best manage their workforces. The success of this rests on selecting the proper approach to the research process, thus leading to the appropriate methodology and overall framework from which results will be derived. This forms a basis for determining the knowledge needed by organizations to recruit and retain qualified talent. In order to determine new understandings of workforce issues, the most desirable approach allows the researcher to develop theories based on the data collected, a process referred to as inductive analysis, as opposed to traditional methodology techniques of basing data on previously existing theories (Patton, 2002). The methodology of grounded theory, which primarily uses inductive analysis, is qualitative, meaning it is an open approach to research (Bowen, 2006). The benefits of applying grounded theory include the freedom allotted to the interviewee in speaking freely without constraints that can be found in traditional data collection and analysis methods. This freedom permits the interviewer to follow the path provided by the interviewee (Ghezelijeh & Emami, 2009). This technique leads to the establishment of new theories and the combination of existing theories which explain the occurrences being studied and allow for appropriate changes in strategies, practices, and techniques in the field.

UNDERSTANDING GROUNDED THEORY

A product of the 1960s, grounded theory centers on the idea that existing theories do not completely explain the incidences occurring in a situation. Given this, grounded theory provides an open approach to research. Using this methodology, the theory or theories responsible for the occurring situations are developed through the interview process designed to allow the progress of the information and the interviews to be managed by the interviewer. Grounded theory allows the interviewer to freely follow the interview's path by allowing participants to speak openly in response to questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The lack of rigid structure aids in the development of new knowledge and comprehension of the underlying occurrences driving the situation being studied. This method of data collection allows one to build a more complete understanding of the direction of the research and foresee possible points of interest that could be critical to the outcome of the study (Ghezelijeh & Emami, 2009). This leads to the creation of new theories and the combination of existing theories.

Grounded theory, as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008), is used to analyze research questions, and it aids in the collection, interpretation, and understanding of collected data for research. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Kara (2005), there are seven primary characteristics of research applicable to using grounded theory. Those characteristics are:

1. Grounded theory assumes that there is an issue which needs to be researched.
2. The aim is to build theory that is faithful to and helps explain this issue.
3. Research question(s) have to be flexible and free enough to explore the issue in depth, and should gradually become narrower during the research process, but they should not become so narrow that they block the possibility of further discovery.

4. Grounded theory is cumulative: analysis begins at the start of the research project, and data collection, analysis and theorizing run alongside each other throughout the research process.
5. Grounded theory tends to be orientated towards practical action rather than towards abstract ideas.
6. In order for theory to be grounded, it must have:
 - Fit: does it fit the issue being researched?
 - Understanding: does it make sense to both service users and service providers?
 - Generality: is the theory sufficiently abstract to make it applicable to the issue being researched in different contexts?
 - Control: does the theory provide a framework for action to achieve change in the issue being researched?
7. The process of developing the grounded theory must be 'theoretically sensitive'. This refers to a personal quality of the researchers, defined as "the ability to recognize what is important in data and to give it meaning" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, as cited by Kara, 2005, ¶ 3).

Knowing the characteristics of grounded theory assists with one's understanding of the application of this methodology in research. Others provide insight into the methodology as it relates to the choice to use grounded theory and the benefits this process provides. As stated by Kara (2005), "Grounded theory is a scientific discipline which is also very creative. Alternating between collecting and analyzing data requires both creativity and scientific rigour" (¶ 5). Barker, Jones, Britton, and Messer (n.d.) add that "grounded theory...presents a single, unified, systematic method of analysis" (Selection of a qualitative methodology, ¶ 2).

Grounded theory is an established methodology that has been used by researchers in numerous fields. In business, it allows new points of views and understanding of the context and practices of working professionals. Petrini and Pozzebon (2009) discuss grounded theory's role in exploring the use of technology, specifically how business intelligence systems is used as a strategy leading to organizational sustainability. Ardichvili, Michell, and Jondle (2009) researched the qualities exhibited by business cultures considered ethical in an effort to determine how to build sustainable ethics practices. Another example of business research utilizing grounded theory is that of Palka, Pousttchi, and Wiedemann (2009), in which the authors examined the common practice of marketing using mobile devices.

The application of grounded theory to the field of healthcare is extensive. According to Morse, Stern, and Corbin (2008), it is the most frequently used qualitative research in health professions. For example, Kennedy, Regehr, Baker, and Lingard (2009) applied grounded theory in a study of medical trainees' seeking assistance from superiors as a means to gain a better overall understanding of the decision making process. Schreiber and MacDonald (2010) studied the role of the nurse anesthetists in the changing work environment using grounded theory. And Eyles, Leydon, Lewith, and Brien (2011) utilized grounded theory to better understand the professional relationship between homeopathic consultation and patient care. The general acceptance and practice of grounded theory in healthcare and the applications in better understanding the role of grounded theory in business allows the implementation of this methodology as a means to determine how the healthcare industry can better recruit and retain the specialized personnel needed to be successful.

RURAL HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS

In understanding the recruitment and retention practices utilized by rural healthcare organizations, one must be aware of their current workforce management situation. These establishments compete with various rural as well as urban employers to attract professionals unique to their industry. As their settings indicate, these organizations are presented with the challenge of attracting qualified individuals to less populated areas that often lack popular amenities of their urban counterparts. In order to compete in this environment rural healthcare organizations promote their unique qualities, providing professionals with a better understanding of the benefits of living and working in rural environments. Examining the success of these practices and developing new insights for improving workforce management techniques allows rural healthcare organizations to be better positioned to compete. Speaking with healthcare professionals and gathering their responses in recruitment and retention practices, allows for a more complete understanding of what it takes to achieve the goal of successful employee recruitment and retention at rural healthcare facilities. Qualitative analysis provides non-restricted research of these concepts, thus resulting in more successful conclusions. The qualitative approach of grounded theory allows for the development of new theories and reduction of bias possible with other approaches to research.

A critical step in researching rural healthcare organizations' practices in workforce management is designing the interviews and analyzing the data. Qualitative analysis, specifically grounded theory, allows a more comprehensive understanding of what is necessary to achieve the goal of employee recruitment and retention to these facilities. As recruiters know, recruiting and retaining quality professionals remains a challenging and necessary task. Healthcare organizations in these regions struggle to meet the needs of the residents and, therefore, require crucial information to aid in the maintenance of a qualified workforce.

In rural healthcare organizations recruiters and human resource professionals strive to understand the reasons to why many qualified healthcare professionals choose not to work in their communities. Furthermore, those responsible for the retention of talent often lack the knowledge of what employees truly desire from their respective employers, which is critical in retaining quality employees. Given this, grounded theory allows recruiters and human resource professionals to have a better understanding of the desires of healthcare professionals seeking employment in these areas. Furthermore, grounded theory ensures that human resource professionals have the necessary knowledge to retain their organizations' talent.

By using grounded theory, personnel of rural healthcare organizations tasked with recruiting and retaining talent discover information useful in their efforts. The participants guide the direction of the research and expose the prevailing theories. These theories provide foundations of understanding to healthcare organizations in recruitment and retention practices. More so, the data collected yields theories designed to improve the successfulness of the efforts of recruiters and human resource professionals of healthcare organizations.

The most common method for collecting data when using grounded theory involves personal, face to face interviews. The instrument designed to gather participants' information should consist of questions that collect the following information.

- Participants' demographic information
- Participants' reasons for remaining in the region

- Participants' opinions regarding what practices recruiters and human resource professionals should consider when recruiting talent
- Participants' opinions regarding what practices human resource professionals should consider when retaining talent
- Current practices for recruiting talent
- Current practices for retaining talent

It is important to ensure that enough data are collected when using grounded theory. According to Rudestam and Newton (2001), "20 to 30 participants may constitute a reasonable sample" (p. 93). Therefore, a minimum sample size of 20 participants is necessary for this methodology.

RESULTS OF USING GROUNDED THEORY IN RURAL HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

Long (2006) examined rural healthcare workforce management practices and employee expectations by applying a grounded theory approach. The findings of the research showed that healthcare professionals' decisions for living, working, and remaining in rural communities ranged greatly from those which could be reasonably expected to surprising revelations. According to the study participants, as indicated in Figure 1 (Appendix A), several factors influence healthcare professionals' decisions to locate in rural communities. The most common reason provided was their personal history (67%) to the area, which they defined as their attachment to the community in the form of personal experiences and their past. Participants elaborated stating that their history in the area provides them with a strong reason to choose to live and work in the community.

Additional factors influencing their decision to locate in these areas included changes in their personal situation (i.e. recent divorce, move closer to family, or better quality of life) and professional situation (i.e. career advancement opportunities, professional development opportunities, educational opportunities) (28%), the healthcare facility has a good reputation in the community (44%), and the healthcare facility offered competitive pay and benefits (52%).

The reasons frequently stated as influencing healthcare professionals to locate in the community include less common, but nevertheless important factors. These factors consisted of financial reasons (22%) and the organization's promotion of educational and career advancement opportunities (22%).

As indicated in Figure 2 (Appendix A), the participants stated that recruiters and human resource professionals should consider increasing pay, offering additional benefits, increasing opportunities for professional development, increasing opportunities for career advancement, supporting local school systems' improvement efforts, and adding local amenities (see Figure 2).

The participants of this study elaborated stating that for those who are beginning careers or in the midst of careers, pay and benefits are great motivators. They also shared during the interviews that those who are approaching the end of their careers are not motivated by pay and benefits. Participants offered suggestions likely to assist in the retention of older, established employees, such as more local amenities, stronger emphasis on social groups with similar interests, social groups who focus on older generations of workers, and career advancement opportunities that demonstrate to the employee the value of his or her service to the organization. Acknowledging the value of their contributions to the success of the organization through their wisdom and years of experience in the healthcare field is also important.

The participants recommended more opportunities for professional development and career advancement be considered to build loyalty for healthcare establishments in these rural communities. They also suggested the organization's administration take an active role in the community. Specifically, they stated that by the administration encouraging the community to improve the school systems in the area and add more local amenities, such as new movie theaters, more activities for children, and additional shopping centers, the administrators could provide a catalyst and be an example to its employees, as well as the leaders of the community. They continued by stating that one of the roles of the healthcare facilities in these rural communities is to set the standard for other businesses and leaders in the area.

CONCLUSION

When conducting research in the recruitment and retention of rural healthcare workforces, one should consider the use of grounded theory as a means to expand the current realm of knowledge and theories available. Through developing new theories and combining existing theories the understanding of the occurrences and situations will be better explained and understood. Research based in grounded theory provides new insight into methods that can be used to improve the techniques organizations and communities use to attract and retain healthcare professionals. With this knowledge recruiters of these communities are better prepared to maintain a qualified workforce. For example, hospitals may be able to expand available services to the surrounding community. Improved healthcare can influence research and charitable foundations, government entities, and private entities to increase grant awards and provide direct investment in the area once there is an established trend of retention of healthcare professionals. Additionally, other professionals may show interest in these communities once healthcare professionals begin migrating to and remaining in the region. Universities and community colleges may be more inclined to offer programs for continued education and professional development, which can result in economic growth to the area. Finally, a positive cycle might be developed to continuously draw and keep other professionals, such as engineers, educators, and scientists, and allow for continued sustainability.

The application of grounded theory allows one to follow the path provided by the research, rather than follow the path provided by past research. This technique encourages researchers to think beyond established theories and consider unknown ideas as a means to explain the occurrences. Through the use of grounded theory, research can be expanded to horizons unseen, answer questions that can assist practitioners, and build new theories that better explain situations currently unexplainable.

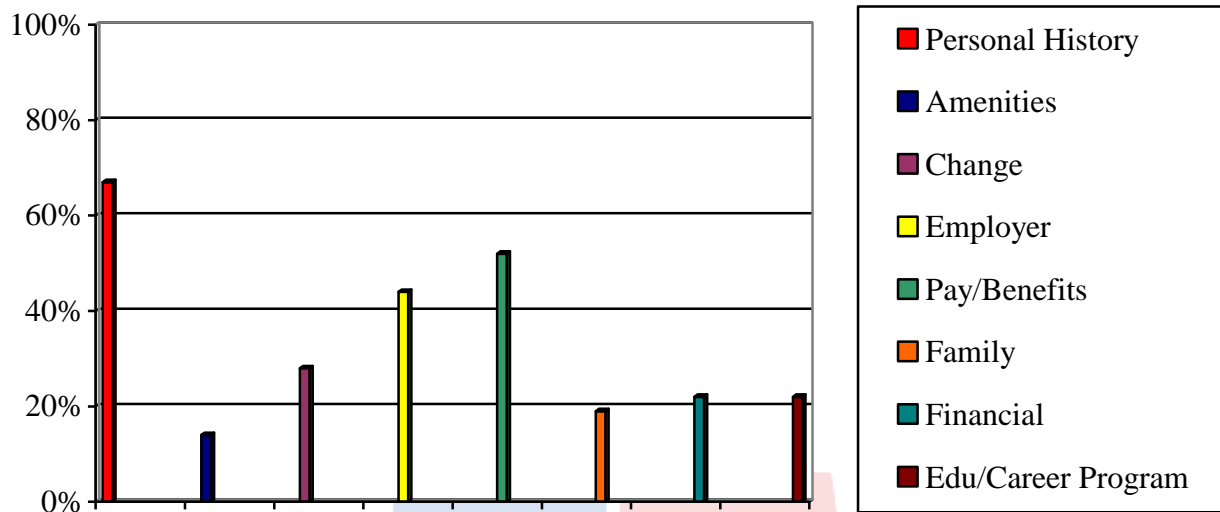
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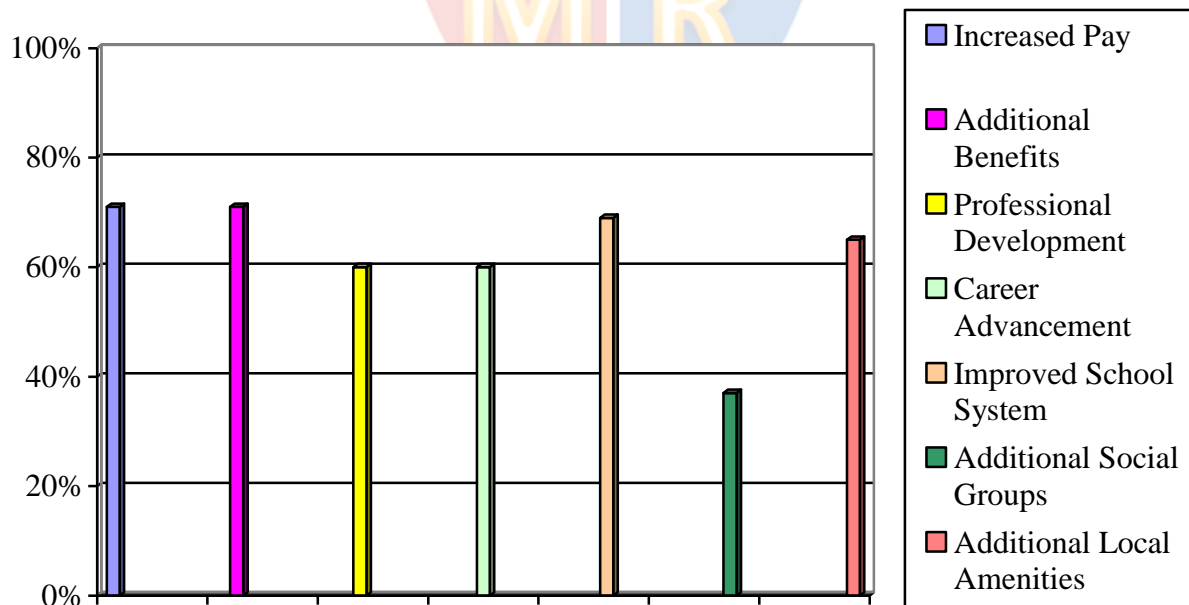
APPENDIX A

Figure 1. Factors contributing to the recruitment of healthcare professionals.



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Figure 2. Recommended changes to recruitment and retention practices.



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