

Innovative Employee Retention Strategies for Rural Universities Post COVID-19

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The pandemic seismically changed post-secondary education, resulting in rural colleges experiencing worsening issues. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that employers have failed to deliver, and that low morale, poor working conditions, and turnover existed before the pandemic. However, the COVID-19 pandemic alone did not cause the great resignation across college campuses. Policies and practices that do not uphold values make teachers feel demoralized and view their workplaces differently (McClure, 2022). Research in human resource management shows that for people to do their jobs, they need to feel safe, valued, and confident that they will have the necessary resources to perform their duties (McClure, 2022).

Problem Identification

Indiana State University is a four-year college in Terre Haute, Indiana, with the North American Industry Classification System Code 611310, for colleges, universities, and professional schools. Employee retention is an issue at Indiana State University that affects the university's ability to fulfill its mission. Not only does the university see a decline in student enrollment and faculty, but there has also been a decrease in retained administrative positions, specifically entry-level applicants (T. Weinzapfel-Smith, personal communication, June 14, 2022).

Significance and Purpose of the Study

Higher education anticipated a loss of students during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the loss of university employees may not have been expected. Low morale and turnover existed before the pandemic (Bichsel et al., 2022). University employees are looking for other jobs, with more than half of the reason being due to pay increases (Bichsel et al., 2022). They are seeking jobs with more desirable pay, remote work opportunities, less work, and more job satisfaction. Bölling and Eriksson (2016) identify multiple benefits that are also gained by society when universities are operating well including commercializing academic knowledge, supporting research, expanding human capital, innovation, increasing the standard of living, and giving people the skills needed to survive in the global workforce.

This study identified factors and practices that influence employee retention at rural colleges and strategies for improving retention at Indiana State University, a four-year public college in Indiana. Indiana State University's employee retention rate fell from July 1, 2018 (1,484 employees) to June 1, 2022 (1,308 employees) (Bichsel et al., 2022). Using the DeVoe problem-based learning model, a change management plan was developed to assist Indiana State with implementing a solution to enhance retention strategies.

Diagnosing The Problem

Employee retention is challenging for human resource professionals but vital for organizational performance. Factors that positively affect employee retention are training and development, compensation and benefits, and the work environment (Al Doghan, 2022). Retention of employees at Indiana State University was an area of expressed concern, a problem requiring more understanding and deliberate investigation. Retaining full-time benefits-receiving employees at Indiana State University has

been an issue. Poor retention rates of university employees negatively determine the university's quality of education and institutional reputation (Al Doghan, 2022). The problem, as seen by the organization, was that employees were leaving, and the efforts to replace them had been unsuccessful. The doctoral project identified factors and practices that positively change employee retention at rural colleges in Indiana. The study answered the following driving research question to assist in that process:

What innovative and employee-centered solutions will secure and sustain the retention of employees at Indiana State University year after year, enabling the university to maintain its competitive advantage?

Six guiding questions were identified to guide the literature review. The topics included supervisory support and career commitment, human resource practices and employee retention, Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, and best practices in ethical and value-driven leadership interventions.

Gap Analysis

A customized holistic framework was developed to analyze the data, evaluate potential solutions, and answer research questions. Concepts from the Virtuous Business Model, secondary research, and input from the partner organization contributed to the solution. The TOWS Matrix was used to determine the actual and desired state of employee retention at Indiana State University. A gap analysis to aid the identification of potential solutions with each evaluated using the McKinsey 7-S framework and Human Capital Elements. The potential solutions were also assessed for risk.

Researchers using quantitative secondary data can put existing data to use that was initially collected for other research purposes, allowing new questions to be answered (Quick & Hall, 2015). Pre-existing data was given to the researcher from the human resources department at the university. Personally identifiable information was omitted. The existing data was originally collected through exit interviews and categorized by reason for termination among Three groups of employees: exempt, non-exempt, and faculty. The data was emailed to the researcher and separated into five Excel sheets from 2018 to 2022. Each Excel sheet contained 52 self-reported reasons why employees left the university. The researcher applied thematic analysis to identify why individuals left. This was done manually and then put into an Excel file.

The top reason for leaving, as reported by all three groups of employees, was accepting another position, which was categorized under the theme entitled personal choice. Under the personal choice theme, reported reasons for leaving the university included accepting another job, a better salary, personal reasons, staying at home, and declined position assignments. Non-exempt employees reported personal reasons 233 times. Exempt employees reported personal reasons 191 times, and faculty reported personal reasons 33 times. These were the highest reported reasons, other than retirement.

The gap analysis was used to determine if the university's retention efforts were being optimized and to identify shortcomings. The gap analysis allowed for easy data comparison and helped to find improvements to already existing processes (Marra, 2017). The current state as identified by the university human resources office was employee retention, which came the 2018-2022 termination analysis date. In July 2019, there were 1485 employees at the university. In 2022, the total number of employees was 1308. The ideal state came from internal goals as identified by human resources at the university.

Recommended Solution

Desirable benefits elsewhere will tempt employees with valuable skill sets to leave an organization (Sawaneh & Kamara, 2019). The optimal solution determined by the analysis was to:

Increase employee retention by adding benefits that support current and future retention and recruitment efforts intended to mitigate turnover.

Some of the retention concepts proposed as a result of the study were keeping track of key performance indicators, surveying employees, tracking the employee turnover rate, and tracking engagement through surveys or questionnaires (Society for Human Resource Management, n.d.). There were 20 benefits offered to the employee benefits director at the university that came from research. Out of the 20 presented, four were considered viable by the university employee benefits specialist. They included:

1. Onsite lactation facilities.
2. Pet insurance and Pet flexible spending account with no use it or lose it provision.
3. Infertility coverage for infertility treatment, in vitro fertilization, and egg freezing, but reimbursing employees for domestic travel and international travel for those seeking medical assistance.
4. Hybrid work opportunities with the subsidized cost of at-home office equipment.

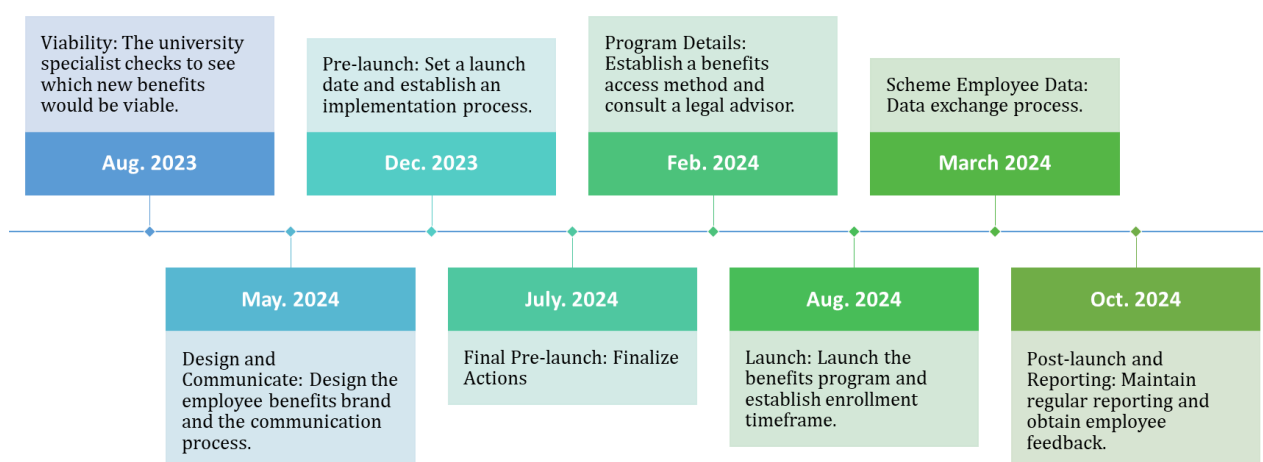
The solutions presented were based on data analysis, research on best practices, and the CUPA-HR 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey. A detailed SWOT Analysis, CHES Analysis, and the TOWS Matrix further developed the solutions. The desired state was compared to the actual retention at Indiana State University. The gap analysis resulted in the best possible solution. Each solution was examined using the McKinsey 7-S framework and evaluated to the extent that it builds on the university's human capital.

Change Management Plan

A comprehensive change management plan was developed to implement the selected solution. Best strategies for leading change, the vision statement, the communication plan, reinforcement strategies, scenario planning, strategy mapping, and an action plan to drive the change were developed. While the implementation of the proposed change has yet to be determined, the researcher has been in discussion with the human resource benefits analyst of the organization to determine an implementation plan. Viable solutions have been determined. The timeline for implementation would be:

Figure 1

Change Management Implementation Timeline



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