



Research Article

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Analysis of "Hierarchy of Needs" as a Strategy to Enhance Academic Retention in South African Universities

Bunmi Isaiah Omodan

Senior Lecturer, Walter Sisulu University,
Butterworth Campus, N2, Butterworth,
4960, South Africa

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Abstract

A high attrition rate exists among South African higher education institutions, which poses a significant challenge to university productivity as an academic enterprise. The attrition/turnover seems disruptive and costly, and some of the disruptive implications are poor productivity, lack of motivation and poor morale to work, including skill drain. This theoretical paper presents Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and its assumptions as a possible motivation that is needed to enhance academic staff retention in the university system. This study was designed using conceptual analysis within the principle interpretive paradigm, enabling the researcher to adequately engage critically in interpreting Maslow's hierarchy of needs and its assumptions as an alternative strategy that could enhance academic staff retention in the university system. The study argued that the five hierarchies of needs (physiological needs, safety/security needs, love and belongingness, esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs), as propounded by Abraham Maslow, are essential in ensuring academic staff retention in the system. The study concludes that total rewards in the form of basic needs, environmental safety and job security, creation of affectionate work-environment, the need for recognition and self-actualisation are the dimensions of academic staff retention in the university system.

Keywords: Hierarchy of needs, Abraham Maslow, turnover/attrition, academic staff, university system

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions, most especially university systems, retain obligation, through their academic staff, to ensure productive teaching and learning, conduct implementable research and life-changing community engagement (Tetteh, 2018). To ensure effective discharge of the three obligations, the place of qualified and motivated academic staff to work towards the actualisation of the goal is not negotiable. Perhaps this is why RoU (1992) concludes that any university's reputation cannot be defined in isolation of the quality of its academic staff. Robyn (2012) also reiterated that higher education institutions' strength depends on the sophistication and proactiveness of their human capital. Therefore, for universities to actualise their aims and objectives, they must thrive on attracting and retaining their trained and productive lecturers (Selesho & Naile, 2014). Unfortunately, literature and personal experiences confirm that universities, especially South Africa, find it challenging to retain their high-performing, well-trained and productive academic staff (Ssekamwa,

1999; Figueron, 2015; Erasmus, Grobler & Van Niekerk, 2015). That is, one of the major concerns of the universities in South Africa is employee turnover which necessitates the need to eliminate such attrition in the country. This becomes important because it does not only affect the culture of teaching and learning (Selesho & Naile, 2014; Towns, 2019), student progression and performance rate (Powell, 2010) but also result in financial wastage because of the expenses involved in the recruitment process and employee development stages (Selesho & Naile, 2014).

The annual Human Resource survey conducted in 2012 confirms that 32 per cent of South African workplaces do not bother about the attrition phenomenon, while 46 per cent of organisations in South Africa accept that retention of talent in their organisation is a major issue (South African Board for People Practices, 2012). That is, the high attrition rate in higher education institutions poses a significant challenge that could have a grave implication on university productivity as an academic enterprise. Horwitz (1991) also confirms that a high turnover/attrition rate can increase mistrust among the employees and subsequently discourage other workers from remaining in the system. According to Figueroa (2015), high education institutions have demonstrated incapacitation in managing academic staff turnover rate and therefore has become a norm in the system for academic staff to migrate from one institution to the others (Teichler, 2015) in the search for greener pastures (Zander, Blümel & Busse, 2013). According to Du Plooy and Roodt (2010), this has increased workloads on staff, which results in burnout and a reduction in employee's retention rate. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Burke (2002) advocated that organisations must gather a concerted effort to retain the power to control their working and/or organisational environment. Employers' understanding of their organisational environment may increase their knowledge on the need to motivate their staff towards retention.

The turnover rate in universities is disruptive and costly, and some of the disruptive implications are poor productivity, lack of motivation and poor morale to work, including skill drain (Manogharan, Thivaharan & Rahman, 2018). Figueroa (2015) also confirms that some of the hidden implications of the employee's turnover in higher education institutions are efforts and the time the employers use invested in training the employees. However, there are numerous reasons while academics of the universities in South Africa migrate from one university to another, but that is not the bone of contention in this article. Instead, based on the existing literature as mentioned above and the researcher's personal experience, this article observed that universities in South Africa are wallowing in the euphoria of attrition among the academic staff, which calls for attention. Therefore, this article aims to address the perpetual university academic staff turnover rate towards ensuring that the universities enjoy the beauty of the academic staff retention rate, which was described as the bedrock of university productivity (Kurdi & Alshurideh, 2020). This theoretical paper will dwell on Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation, otherwise known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, to provide a possible solution to the academic staff turnover rate in South African universities. Before I present this theory and its assumptions benefits, there is a need to explore the literature on employee's attrition/turnover and retention in South Africa.

1.1 *Employees Turnover/Attrition in South African Universities*

Employee turnover or attrition, which is used interchangeably in this study, is the movement of workers around the labour market, between firms, jobs and occupations (Abbasi & Hollman, 2000; Owence, Pinagase & Mercy, 2014). In the case of the university system, the turnover of academic staff could then be argued to mean the rotation of academic staff around the university system. One would then ask, what is the reason behind the uncontrollable movement or migration of academic staff among the universities. Among many factors that cause attrition in the university system, according to Owence, Pinagase and Mercy (2014), is poor leadership, poor salary scale, poor condition of service, lack of growth and career opportunities, excess workload, among others. Job dissatisfaction has been found as a factor of lack of commitment and subsequently affect employee retention rate (Abdali, 2011; Agarwal & Sajid, 2017). That is, there is a significant relationship between job satisfaction and employee turnover.

That is, when employees are satisfied with their work environment, it will lead to a low level of the turnover rate in the system (Kuria, Alice & Wanderi, 2012). A study conducted by Owence et al. (2014) in South Africa also revealed that poor condition of service associated with short-term contracts, understaffing, which leads to indiscriminate workload, lack of academic promotion and the prospect for timely promotion, are the reason for staff turnover. Another study conducted by Theron, Barkhuizen and Du Plessis (2014) confirms that "compensation, emotional recognition, a bonus structure that reflects employee contribution, performance management systems, mentorship and career development opportunities" are the dimension of academic staff turnover, therefore need concerted attention from by higher education institutions in South Africa. This is perhaps why Mensele and Coetzee (2014) recommend that South African higher education institutions ensure commitment among their academic staff because it enhances the intention to stay at the job.

The issue of academic turnover is not limited to South African higher institutions. A study conducted in Lagos, Nigeria, also indicates the existence of turnover among higher institutions with a finding that there is a relationship between intention for turnover and financial rewards (Olawale, & Olanrewaju, 2016). Perhaps, this is why Fapohunda (2012) suggested the importance of good wages to enhance productivity and reduce the tendency of turnover among workers. The Malaysian Insiders (2014) reiterated that Malaysians' decision to leave one job for the other hinged on competitive salary, condition of services and lack of trust in leadership. This aligns with findings from the General Industry Total Rewards Survey that the turnover rate among industries increased to (13.2%) in 2013 from (12.3%) in 2012 (Abdul Latif & Saraih, 2016). Research conducted in Zimbabwe also confirms that the issue of leadership is significant to academic intention to stay or leave the system. The study found out that lecturers who are satisfied with their faculty leaders have the intention to stay on the job, while those with less trust in their deans and other leaders have a turnover tendency (Gwavuya, 2011).

Based on the above literature, it is evidence that academics in the universities face many human resources challenges that necessitate the unavoidable turnover. The literature also confirms that many factors could limit the academic staff from migrating from one university to the other. Such factors are the provision of competitive salary, good working conditions and conditions of service, good leadership and motivation for commitment among the academic staff. Based on the literature, one could argue that employee turns over in higher institutions such as universities is a point of concern. Despite huge research conducted in this field, there is still evidence that the attrition rate of academic staff in universities, especially in South Africa, persists. Therefore, the study presents a theoretical analysis located within Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as a possible practice to ameliorate the issue of turnover among academic staff in South African universities.

1.2 Research Question

In other to respond to the above problem, the following research question is asked to guide the study:

- How can Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory be unravelled as a solution to address the academic staff turnover/attrition rate in South African universities?

1.3 Research Objectives

In order to answer the above research question, the following research objective was formulated to dismantle the question. That is, the study

- Presented Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and its assumptions as a possible motivation needed to enhance academic staff retention in the university system.

2. Methodology

This study adopted conceptual analysis as a design for the article. This method involves coherence clarification of concepts, critical reasoning and their relations and identification of theoretical

implications and assumptions (Petocz & Newbery, 2010). This method is sometimes called "theoretical research" closely related to critical thinking on content using linguistic expression of what we think or talk about (Bennett & Hacker, 2003). This is in accordance with the definition of Furner (2004), conceptual analysis is a method that recognises concept as event, properties and relationship of meaning "by identifying and specifying the conditions under which any entity or phenomenon is (or could be) classified under the concept in question". Therefore, this argument is located within conceptual analysis principles by presenting the adopted theory (Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory), analysing it based on the researcher's critical thinking and argumentative reasoning of the chosen theory. This method also enables the researcher to adequately interpret the content of the theory towards meaning-making in order to provide a solution to the problem of staff attrition in the university system. Hence, this study takes solace in the interpretive paradigm, which encourages interpretation and understanding of the world of a particular phenomenon (Ogan & Ziebart, 1991). That is, this paradigm makes an effort to understand the viewpoints of both the researcher and the *researched*. This corroborates the argument of Bogdan and Biklen (1998) that the interpretivist paradigm recognises individual interpretation of issues and the world around them. Therefore, the rationale for this paradigm is derived from the choice of conceptual analysis design, which also preaches critical interpretation of issues/concepts. The adopted theory is presented below, and the subsequent analysis of the theoretical assumptions in relation to how the academic staff retention could be mentioned in the university system.

3. Presentation of the Adopted Theory

The study adopted Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as an alternative to unravel the issue of academic turnover in the university system. This was presented below and in chronological order: the etymology of the theory, the presentation of the assumptions, including a diagrammatic illustration of the theory, and how the theory could assist in ameliorating the problem of the study.

3.1 Etymological perspective of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Abraham Maslow, a lawyer and an American psychologist, developed the hierarchy of needs theory in 1943 to interpret human motivation in organisations (Cherry, 2021; Maslow, 1943). The theory is recognised across all fields of studies (Bouzenita & Boulanouar, 2016) and has been recognised as one of the most-cited publications in the last forty-six years (Yang, 2003). His hypothesis recommended that individuals have a number of essential needs that must be met prior to their movement to seek more social, emotional, and self-actualising needs (Cherry, 2020). According to Cherry, as at that time, Maslow was majorly interested in learning more about what makes people happy and how their happiness could be sustained. This agrees with Lester, Hvezda, Sullivan, and Plourde (1983) that Maslow believed that people want to have power over their desire and urge for self-actualisation. That is, people have an inherent desire to become what they want to become. To achieve this, Maslow argued that basic needs such as food, shelter, safety, love and self-esteem must be met (Maslow, 1954). According to Haggbloom (2002), Maslow contributed tremendously to the field of psychology, and he was recognised as one of the 20th century foremost psychologists. As a psychologist, Maslow (1943, 1954) expressed that individuals are propelled to attain certain needs which a few needs take priority over others. Fundamentally, peoples' requirement is for physical survival. This will be the primary thing that persuades behaviour; when primary needs are met, they no longer motivate; rather, another urge is created for another stage (Bouzenita & Boulanouar, 2016). The five stages of Maslow hierarchy of needs are presented below.

3.2 Theoretical Assumptions: The five stages of Maslow hierarchy of needs

The hierarchy of needs theory, according to Maslow, includes five stages model of human needs, otherwise regarded as hierarchical levels within a pyramid (McLeod, 2018). According to Maslow, the higher needs are activated when the lower need has been achieved (Maslow, 1943). This is captured well by Ajayi and Ayodele (2002) that the actualised needs are no longer motivated, and that is why the organisation must study their employee to be sure that they provide the needed motivation for them. The hierarchy is designed from the bottom up: physiological needs, safety/security needs, love and belongingness, esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs. These are discussed below:

Physiological needs: This hierarchy of needs is the first and the lowest in the Maslow hierarchy of needs. One could argue that this stage is one of the important aspects of human beings because the basic needs are essential to human survival (Cao, 2013). Among these needs are food, shelter, sex, clothing, warmth, resting and all biological needs of human beings (McLeod, 2018; Schroeder & Epley, 2020; Benti & Stadtmann, 2021). This is what McLeod (2018) regarded as biological needs for the survival of human beings. Based on the importance attached to these basic needs, one could argue along with Maslow that physiological needs, though the first and the lowest among the hierarchy of need, is the most important which must be met before an individual can think of other needs. Therefore, the other needs could be regarded as the secondary human needs that are based on the pedestal of human insatiability. Safety and security needs make up the next stage of the model.

Safety/security needs: Safety and security are second to physiological needs from the bottom up. This stage involves the psychology of being secured. It comprises the potential for stability, protection, and freedom from anxiety and fear (Shahrawat & Shahrawat, 2017). However, these needs may be different from one organisation and the other and from for each individual, depending on the situation and their living (Poston, 2009). This is to say that when people are satisfied with their basic needs, they start to think about how safe they are, in terms of their job security, lives and properties, among others. When this need is met, the next need in the hierarchy is activated. This is in congruence with Otway and Carnelley's (2013) argument that unfulfilled safety needs may affect or prevent people's progress to attaining personal esteem. Hence, there must be a motivational provision that could enhance the sense of security and safety in workplaces. Next in the model is love and belonging.

Love and belongingness needs: When physiological and safety needs are met, the next level of need becomes activated. This is a stage where social relationships and feelings of belongingness are imminent. That is, the people start to feel the need for love, friendships, and affectionate relationships with other employees to ease the feeling of possible loneliness and lonesomeness (Burlinson & Thoron, 2014). These needs include the need for intimacy, interpersonal relationships, trust and the urge for acceptability and quest for respect and affiliation (Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017). This is to say that, when the safety need is met, every human being will feel the urge for recognition, love, and feeling for social affections among colleagues and or/the society. The next to this need is esteem needs.

Esteem Needs: This stage emphasises acknowledgement and recognition, which involves self and public esteem. That is, Maslow divided this stage into two; the need for self-esteem (which involves a person for independence, dignity, mastery, achievement) and public esteem (which involves the need for status and prestige) (Ozguner & Ozguner, 2014; McLeod, 2018). When this need is satisfied, it leads to feelings of self-worth and self-satisfaction and eliminates inability and inadequacy. From this assumption, one could argue that this hierarchy tends to improve people's interest to feel convinced about themselves and their capability to improve their organisations and positively affect the lives of people around them. The next and the last stage of this model is self-actualisation.

Self-actualisation: This is the highest and the last stage of the hierarchy of needs propounded by Abraham Maslow. This, according to Maslow (1987, p. 64), is the actualisation stage of life a desire "to become everything one is capable of becoming" is activated. Employees realise self-fulfilment and

potentials for personal growth at the peak of their experiences. At this stage, individualised needs are met when one has achieved his personal goals that one is capable of achieving. However, this stage only comes into play when other lower levels are actualised (Fallatah & Syed, 2018). The argument here is that an average human being is set and ready to do everything within the capacity to reach their ultimate goals. This is also applicable to employees of any organisation, including the university system. Figure 1 below is the diagrammatic representation of the model as presented by BrainKart (n.d).

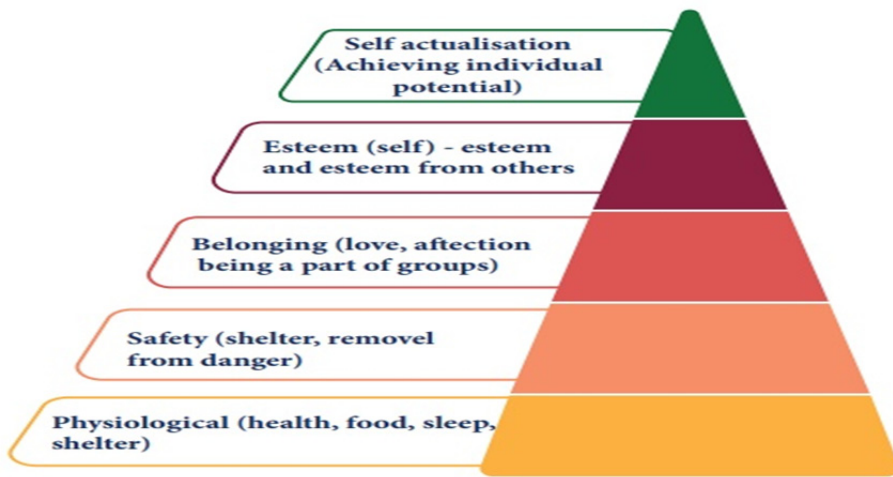


Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model

Haven conceptualised Maslow hierarchy of needs theory; one could note that all the five levels are human-related and related to the psychology of human life and their needs at every point in time. Another fact is that the hierarchy is positioned in such a way that when one level is actualised, the next level becomes activated, and when the higher level is actualised, the lower level no longer motivate. Lastly, the self-actualisation level represents people's goals that have been met, and they will henceforth be pleased with their life and the processes/organisations that make them.

4. Discussion and Analysis of Argument

In order to fulfil the objective of the study, the hierarchy of needs theory and its assumptions have been presented as a motivational strategy that is capable of enhancing academic staff retention in the university system. This is presented based on the assumption of the hierarchy of needs. That is, how the physiological needs, safety/security needs, love and belongingness, esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs are relevantly useful in ensuring motivation for academic retention rate in the system.

4.1 Physiological Needs as Motivation for Retention

The level one of the hierarchies of needs theory, as discussed above, confirms that every human being, including university lecturers, deserves basic physiological needs which could be met by providing adequate remuneration and competitive payment. That is, university lecturers are expected to earn good pay that is commensurate with their job where they will be able to afford basic needs for themselves and their family members. Such needs could be good medical plans, good condition of

services, recognition and payment for excess workloads and payment of bonuses as and when due. The argument here when all the basic needs are met, such employees will only think of activating the higher needs rather than thinking of exiting the organisation for greener pasture. This argument is in consonance with the findings that motivation and adequate remuneration are significant to staff retention and lead to productivity and commitment to organisational goals (Ng'ethe, 2014; Bawa, 2017). The finding of Mabaso and Dlamini (2018) also confirms this argument that total rewards are positively significant to organisational commitment in higher education institutions.

4.2 *Safety Needs as Motivation for Retention*

According to the hierarchy of needs theory, when physiological needs are met, then the safety needs become activated. In this regard, the employers of the academic staff of the university system should endeavour to understudy the level of needs of all academic staff. After the basic needs are met, then the academic staff is likely to develop an urge for job security and the safety of their personality, including their properties. This is expedient because an average human being hates both financial and future insecurity and/ or anything that could constitute a threat to their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Therefore, universities must be aware that the safety of lives, property and job security of their employees is fundamental, and when these are not guaranteed, they may think or consider trying another institution where they think they will be saved. This is in consonance with the finding of Akpan (2013) that the safety and job security of employees are tantamount to the commitment and retention of university teachers. This argument also confirms that the argument of Abdullah and Ramay (2012) employee's desire and wish is a conducive and secure, and futuristic job. Therefore, the university system, most especially its human resource department, should be aware of the need for the job and organisational safety to ensure that its best staff are retained in the system.

4.3 *Love and Belongingness as Motivation for Retention*

Since the theory argues that when a certain level is met, the lower hierarchy no longer motivates, that is, when lecturers in the universities are able to retain their jobs by meeting the physiological and safety needs, then it becomes the responsibility of the employers to ensure that there is level plain grounds, conducive and affectionate organisational climate where one could achieve his or her urge for relationships, love and compassionate organisational relationships among staff. This is to argue that professional affections in the organisation will enhance a sense of belonging, and employees of such organisations will feel the spirits of members. This argument is located within the attachment approach in organisational development, where professional relationships promote unanimous productivities (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). This argument is also supported by Gberevbie (2010) findings which revealed that appropriate employee relations that include compassionate human treatment are profitable for organisational commitment, which could also translate to retention and performance among lecturers. Therefore, a university environment that accommodates professional love and creates a sense of belonging will likely retain its best hand on the job.

4.4 *Esteem Needs as Motivation for Retention*

According to Maslow's postulation, this stage is fundamental because it calls for recognition and acknowledgement of people and their activities within the university system. When the needs for love and belongingness are met, it activates the desire for reputation, prestige, acknowledgement of exceptional activities, achievement, and creativity. This may include promotion as and when due, giving awards that promote academic staff's prestige and enhancing self-confidence among academic staff. This will further improve the interest of such a lecturer to see beyond the work with all sense of self-trust and confidence. This argument corroborates the finding of Bryant-Hampton et al. (2010) that adequate recognition of performance activities is a good strategy for employee's retention. In the

same line of finding, staff recognition in the form of "kudos" enhances staff retention rate (Fisher et al., 2016). Therefore, one could argue that at some stage in the work-life of academic staff, the lower level of needs, no matter how adequate they are, we will no longer motivate but only when the employers show adequate recognition to its staff.

4.5 Self-actualisation Needs as Motivation for Retention

According to Maslow, the last but not the least among the hierarchy of needs theory is the goal actualisation stage where academic staff feel fulfilled in their career. At that stage, their employers must be aware that the lower level of needs is no longer useful in keeping such an employer to the job. This stage includes actualising personal, creativity, self-growth, and career attainment, fulfilling full potentials (Komninos, 2020). Such level among academics could be when they attain the position of professorship, appointment into management positions such as deanship, Vice Chancellorship and relative leadership of political groups within or outside the system. At that stage, one could argue that the only thing that could motivate such staff are when they are recognised with various leadership positions where the feeling of inner peace in their career are felt. This argument is consistent with the finding that affiliation and self-actualisation factors are significant to employees retention in a positive direction (Kurdi, Alshurideh & Afaishat, 2020). Based on this, the employer should be cognisance of how organisational leadership positions would be structured to favour academic staff's higher needs.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study established the uncontrollable and persistent academic staff turnover in the university system, which forms the lacuna for this study. The theoretical solution was presented and designed through conceptual analysis located within the principle of interpretivism as a lens to unravel the academic staff attrition rate in the university system. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory was analysed and argued as an alternative strategy to address the issue of academic turnover in South African universities. Based on the analysis, I conclude that total rewards in the form of basic needs, environmental safety and job security, creation of affectionate work-environment, the need for recognition and self-actualisation are the dimensions of academic staff retention in university system with different motivational needs that could keep employed academics on the job. Therefore, employers of university academics in South Africa should at every point in time know which stages of hierarchy of needs could motivate and which level could no longer motivate —noting the fact that when the higher level is met, the lower level no longer motivates. Therefore, cognisance must be placed on individual academic staff to understand which stage of needs they are, which levels have been met, and which level could motivate and retain them.

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