



## NCVO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT Good employment practice case study

### Improving recruitment and retention

*Susan Murray-Johnson is the deputy chief-executive for the [British Society for Rheumatology](#) (BSR). Susan spoke to us about the initiatives she'd taken at BSR to improve their recruitment and retention strategy.*

#### 1. How did this come about? What brought this issue to light?

- Over the last ten years, BSR has had a rapid growth from 10 to 22 staff members. These staff members make up a series of small teams.
- In the past, high turnover rates (27% in 2005) had resulted in entire teams departing. An example of this was the external relations team, which had three out of the four members leave at the same time.
- Last year, for different reasons than the 2005 departures, three out of four of Susan's team also left, including the loss of the finance manager, which caused huge disruption, especially as it was at year end.
- Prior to their current location, BSR were in a very traditional town house and the layout meant that it was possible to not see people for weeks at a time. The new offices are open plan, and the change was difficult for some members of staff. This may have contributed to some of the turnover since 2005.
- Loss of knowledge had become a big issue too. Due to the high turnover and sometimes unexpected departures of staff members, knowledge loss was very high.
- There are some junior posts within the organisation that traditionally have a high turnover, with people often staying in post for just a couple of years. Often, bright young graduates are recruited who are then keen to move on and up very quickly.

#### 2. What were the aims?

- **To improve retention and reduce staff turnover**
- **To change recruitment practices to help employ people who better fitted the organisational requirement.**

#### 3. Who was involved?

Susan was the lead on this project although external consultants were used for job evaluation.

#### 4. What did you do? How did you plan it?

A recruitment, retention and remuneration strategy was drawn up which highlighted the above issues and gave potential solutions to take forward. These included:

- **Review of staff benefits**
- **Reviewing Current Salary Bandings – job evaluation of all posts**
- **Training Review**

#### 5. How was it designed? What format did it take?

In the past, a very traditional recruitment model was used, whereby people were hired into a role, trained where needed and allowed to get on with their jobs. A new model however was proposed in an updated recruitment policy where by **people were to be recruited for their attitude as well as their skills**, with the potential for training afterwards to close any gaps in skill.

As such, whilst people were still recruited based on abilities, **looking for attitudes and potential fit in a team was included when the panel were unsure on who was the best candidate for the role**. BSR still have job descriptions and person specifications but now attitude is used to differentiate between candidates.

They decided to invest more in training for staff and to continue to use a nationalised pay scale for staff to help keep salaries in line with national averages.

#### 6. How was it delivered?

##### Retention and Benefits

- Job evaluation was done using the [NJC](#) scales. They employed [LVSC](#) to do this work. This was done because especially in 2005, pay was a reason for the high turnover although as a result of this implementation, pay was not a reason for the turnover that was seen last year. This was confirmed at the time by [exit interviews](#).
- **Benefits is another thing that was enhanced to help reduced turnover**, as despite BSR spending a lot of money on them, most people didn't seem to be aware of them. An example was HSA healthcare which was brought in, but the problem was that the relationship that existed was between the employee and HSA, and so the benefit provided wasn't attributed to BSR's commitment to staff well-being.
- In the past, they had always has monthly team meetings, but now they are quarterly but longer. These usually start with 1.5 hours training, followed by lunch and then the meeting itself. This means that **there is continual training for all staff**. Attendance is also mandatory for this unless leave is already booked.

- They changed office to somewhere a lot more modern and mostly open plan. This of course led to issues as some people really disliked it although the turnover that came as a result of this saw people adopting a **generally more open way of working**, which seemed to be the attitude that BSR wanted to recruit for.

### Knowledge Transfer

- With regards to knowledge transfer issues, for practical points, **working in teams on policy and procedure guidelines is very important to ensure that at least a paper legacy is left should people leave.**
- It is of course harder to do this in other areas e.g. practical roles, such as BSR's conference team. Here though, the team is encouraged to develop an extensive work plan to help keep a trail of what is being done.
- With areas like policy work, where people are in constant talks with other organisations, it has been decided to make multiple people lead discussions, not just one person, so that not everything is left with one person. **Spreading knowledge between a team like this acts as damage limitation.**
- For larger projects, a **steering group**, which has non-staff on the group too including volunteers and doctors, also helps **broaden the knowledge base.**

## 7. What went well in the implementation?

Training was seen in a very positive light. Susan explained that **people like training as it is seen to be an investment in people.** At BSR they cover everything from basic IT upwards. They also do whole team training, although it can be challenging to find training subjects that relate to everyone.

Due to the small nature of the organisation, it is possible to talk to everyone outside of meetings if needed, although this is usually on a more consultative basis instead of just updating each other.

**The pay reviews and benefits together have been seen very positively by staff and have helped reduced turnover,** but the benefits had needed more promotion. Now, they are promoted both during applications and at induction.

In 2008 (and likely to be repeated in 2009), **a staff survey was conducted at the end of the year.** This survey concentrated on the positive and the negative aspects of working for BSR. The results were generally very positive, highlighting a relaxed and sociable workplace as positive factors. This was a huge change from what was experienced when turnover was at its highest in 2005.

Since the last wave of turnover last year, **there has actually been 0% turnover** which has been fantastic for BSR. The only recruitment that was done in that time was filling new posts or covering maternity leave.

## 8. What barriers did you face?

One problem found when replacing the finance manager was that once they had offered someone a job, their third sector employer was merely able to offer them a substantial pay rise to not move which they did. This highlights how competitive

voluntary sector jobs now are and highlights the fact that **the voluntary sector does have a lot more say in what it does with its finances and who it values as its staff.**

To combat this, in the interim, they just had to tick over - this involved getting auditors in who provided an accountant for them, and they also got a temp in to help cover the workload. When recruiting back to this post, they aimed for someone at a higher level who was both qualified but also had the right attitude.

In terms of benefits, there had been a very low pension uptake. This was partly due to the young workforce, with at least half of them being under 32.

**A big organisational barrier is people asking why the change is happening as its always been done a certain way before. People are often not prepared for this and as such, change needs to be done very slowly.**

#### **9. What would you do differently?**

Doing it sooner would have been good, but wouldn't have done anything differently.

#### **10. Any future developments in the pipe line?**

They have recently appointed their first person on annualised hours, giving the staff member a lot more flexibility. It was project work and the person had the experience to know when they needed to be in. This person was also recruited on skills and attitude. This approach is something that will be kept in mind for the future.

Things are in a phase now where after a lot of change, everything is being consolidated. Growth has reached a plateau and there will may not be much more in the next few years. The focus is now on quality of what is done, not sheer output.

#### **11. Final comments/advice for others?**

- Susan gave an interesting example that highlighted how important flexibility can be. Recently, a staff member had resigned to go travelling, but as they were exceptionally good at their job, they were asked to not resign but to take a sabbatical despite not having qualified for one based on length of service. By doing this, **they can ensure that knowledge loss is kept to a minimum.** This also helped them avoid doing a full recruitment campaign when they already had someone who was good at their job available. **Flexibility was key** and since 2005, BSR have become a lot more open to new ideas.
- Advice to others: **Be flexible** and **recruit for attitude.** There is no point in recruiting for skills but then finding out that person doesn't want to be there or they just don't fit in. **Make full use of inductions and probation periods too.** They haven't had any cases of not taking employment further after probation, but it is good for both parties to see if there's a good fit. If there's not, especially in small organisation, a knock-on effect of disruptiveness can occur. **It is also important to stay open to things like extending probation periods if necessary.**

- New people can actually be an opportunity and should be seen that way. Whilst someone in the past may have been good, there are always others out there and **an outside view can really help an organisation grow.**
- There are now staff teams that talk a lot which is good. Everyone is very open, and although this can result in occasional gossip, problems are dealt with a lot quicker. **Openness should be encouraged.**
- It is interesting that the working environment can definitely be shaped by the physical environment – this is always worth keeping in mind.