HR Research Results

Key Findings From SHRM Foundation-Funded Studies

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During the past three years, the SHRM Foundation has funded more than $1.5 million in research grants and is now a leading funder of HR research. The Foundation awards grants to fund rigorous, original research with practical implications for management practice. To assist HR professionals in applying this knowledge in their organizations, this brochure presents the results of four high-impact research studies completed in 2010.

How Research Advances the HR Profession

Once a SHRM Foundation study is completed, the findings are written up and submitted to top-tier, peer-reviewed journals for publication. In general, less than 10 percent of articles submitted are accepted for publication. However, the SHRM Foundation is very selective in its funding criteria, with the result that more than 80 percent of SHRM Foundation-funded research subsequently has been published. Journals publishing SHRM Foundation research include *Human Resource Management*, *the Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology*.

After publication, research results are presented at professional conferences and used as the basis for writing textbooks. Students studying HR and business rely on these materials to learn about the topic and prepare for professional careers. The research also is used to update professional certification exams and to prepare new exam questions. Authors and consultants study research results and incorporate the findings into their reports and presentations.

The cumulative effect of multiple research studies is to discover and document what practices work best and under what conditions. In this way, research advances the HR knowledge base, educates practitioners and ultimately influences the practice of human resource management.

The SHRM Foundation’s research grant program is made possible by the generous support of its donors. To read more about SHRM Foundation research, visit www.shrm.org/foundation and select “Research Grants.”
Work-family programs are discretionary programs that go beyond the basic requirements of the Family and Medical Leave Act and share the common goal of supporting employees’ family demands. They include programs such as paid/unpaid elder care leave, flexible spending accounts for dependent care, elder care resource and referral, child care resource and referral, flexible spending accounts for elder care, and on-site child care. Such work-family programs are offered by organizations that believe doing so will benefit the business and enhance employee commitment and performance. Despite this, there is no clear evidence that work-family programs impact business outcomes. Wendy Casper and Marcus Butts investigated the business case for work-family programs by exploring the degree to which the availability and use of these programs relate to positive employee attitudes and performance.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

1. Merely offering work-family programs is related to greater perceptions of organizational support for family, and these perceptions of support improve job attitudes and performance.

2. Employees who use work-family programs have lower work-to-family conflict than those who do not. Employees with lower work-to-family conflict have more positive work attitudes and perform better at work.

3. The influence of work-family program availability on outcomes is stronger than the influence of work-family program use on outcomes. Thus, offering work-family programs can result in improved attitudes and performance, even when the use of these programs is low. Offering work-family programs may have a positive effect on work-related outcomes regardless of whether an employee personally benefits.

4. Offering more work-family programs yields better results. The influence of offering work-family programs on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes is stronger when more programs are offered than when fewer programs are offered. Offering a variety of programs that address a broad spectrum of work-family issues is likely to result in the most favorable outcomes.

Making work-family programs available appears to have a positive influence on employee attitudes and job performance. Moreover, although work-family program use relates to improved attitudes and performance, even just the mere availability of these types of programs can have positive outcomes on employee performance. Thus, making work-family programs available may lead to favorable outcomes for organizations even when the use of these programs is low.
The combination of retiring Baby Boomers, declining fertility rates and shifts in the critical competencies held by younger workers is contributing to what promises to be a pronounced labor shortage within the next few decades. Despite these warnings, few organizations have taken proactive steps to curtail the negative effects that the aging workforce may have for the future growth of their companies.

Older workers tend to be better performers than their less experienced, younger counterparts. One obvious means of responding to a shortage in skills is to retain high-performing older workers longer. Unfortunately, a major obstacle to the full utilization and retention of older workers is ageism, or discriminatory attitudes and behaviors toward aging workers, which can demoralize them and discourage them from remaining in the workforce. Indeed, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission statistics suggest that verdicts against employers related to age-based discrimination are on the rise, with lawsuits costing defendants a total of $72.1 million in 2009 alone, suggesting that ageism is a major problem in organizations.

In this research, Lisa Nishii and Susanne Bruyère argue that the work context affects the extent to which high-performing older workers experience ageism. They explore three forms of inclusion as contextual factors that might affect experiences of ageism: the inclusiveness of workers’ unit climates, inclusion in the unit manager’s in-group and inclusion in the unit’s age cohort.

**KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

1. High-performing older workers who experience age-based discrimination are less satisfied at work (and this may be reflected in their job performance).

2. High-performing older workers are more likely to quit their jobs when they feel they have been treated unfairly because of their age.

3. Even those employees who do not file formal claims of discrimination noted experiencing some ageism that makes their work lives unpleasant and, therefore, makes them more likely to quit their jobs.

4. Key ways to minimize ageism:
   - Create and implement HR practices without bias so that people from different backgrounds are not disadvantaged.
   - Create strong norms about the value of engaging one’s “whole self” at work, developing relationships across traditional demographic boundaries, mindfully learning from differences and integrating diverse points of view in decision-making.
   - Facilitate relationships between managers and employees. When employees develop high-quality relationships with their managers, they benefit from greater access to developmental opportunities and resources, personally motivating exchanges with the leader, and valued group opportunities. Line managers need to be made aware of the benefits associated with inclusive
leadership and trained on strategies for refining their leadership styles in ways that enable them to develop high-quality relationships with employees of all backgrounds and needs.

- Assess employees’ perceptions of the inclusiveness of the organization in annual employee surveys. Units that lack inclusive climates should be targeted for interventions that focus on identifying perceived sources of bias, shifting people’s assumptions to allow the discovery of unseen connections among group members and implementing group process strategies that foster more democratic decision-making. Once members have opportunities to develop more differentiated and meaningful understandings of “different” others, they will be less likely to rely on damaging stereotypes when interacting with one another.

Older workers tend to perform at higher levels than younger workers, so they are valuable assets to organizations. However, when older workers experience age-based discrimination, they are more likely to quit their jobs, taking their institutional knowledge and expertise to competing firms. The good news is that organizations can do something about this: when they cultivate inclusive work group climates and encourage line managers to develop supportive, high-quality relationships with all workers (including older workers), older workers will tend to experience less age-based discrimination and be more likely to stay. When organizations take measures to reduce age-based discrimination, they lower not just the strategic liability associated with losing high performers but also the legal liability associated with discrimination.

Keeping the Most Experienced Employees by Deferring Retirement

Samuel B. Bacharach, Ph.D., and Peter Bamberger, Ph.D., Cornell University

For more than a decade, experts have been warning that in order to avoid a large and rather sudden loss of needed skills and proprietary knowledge because of Baby Boomer retirements, employers will have little choice but to adopt policies and practices aimed at motivating older, retirement-eligible employees to defer retirement. Samuel Bacharach and Peter Bamberger examined the factors that play a key role in determining whether an individual retires upon becoming eligible to draw retirement benefits.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Although fewer than expected study participants retired upon eligibility, various job, organizational and relational factors were found to influence the likelihood of such behavior.

1. The economic downturn drastically reduced retirement rates. Based on previous estimates, it was assumed that at least 25 percent of the sample would retire upon eligibility. In fact, only approximately 10 percent of the sample actually left their career job and started drawing on their retirement benefits. This suggests that employers should be prepared for a pent-up demand for retirement as the economy recovers.

2. Job design influences retirement deferment. Retirement-eligible workers who perceive their job as more challenging were much less likely to retire upon eligibility. However, the impact of job challenge on the likelihood of retirement...
upon eligibility is diminished among older workers. Employers seeking to retain retirement-eligible workers should take steps to either redesign the jobs of younger retirement-eligible employees to ensure an adequate level of job challenge, or consider redeploying these workers to more engaging positions.

3. Organizational policies and practices influence retirement deferment. Retirement-eligible workers who reported that their employer offers seasonal employment, the opportunity to work reduced hours or other flex-time alternatives were much less likely to retire upon eligibility.

4. A more supportive work context was found to have divergent effects on the likelihood of retirement upon eligibility depending upon age. For "younger" workers (those 61 or younger), increased levels of social support were associated with a lower probability of retirement upon eligibility. Additionally, the probability of retirement upon eligibility among these "younger" retirement-eligible workers increases as a direct function of the proportion of those among their close work-based peers retiring. For those 62 and older, increased levels of social support were associated with an increased probability of retirement upon eligibility. However, their retirement was not influenced by the retirement decisions of their close work-based peers. For employers, these findings reinforce the importance of investing in supportive work climates as a means by which to prevent the “snowballing” of one or two employee retirements into a broader wave.

HR professionals interested in retaining their older workforce may be able to do so by reviewing and modifying basic organizational policies and practices found to influence the retirement behavior of retirement-eligible workers. The actions that are likely to have the strongest impact on retirement deferment include job redesign and/or the redeployment of older workers into more challenging positions, the wider adoption of flex-work arrangements and the encouragement of peer support in the work environment. Although some of these actions may be costly to implement, by allowing for the retention of retirement-eligible employees, they may ultimately be justified by lowering the significant costs associated with the search for and training of replacements.

Building Team Resilience: Lessons Learned from College Sports Coaches

Benson Rosen, Ph.D., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Bradley L. Kirkman, Ph.D., Texas A&M University

Work teams and sports teams share many things in common, not the least of which is the desire to succeed and sustain success over time. In sports and in business, the path to success is not without pitfalls. Sports teams sometimes lose key players to injuries, go into slumps and lose focus. Work teams lose key members to reassignment, encounter unexpected customer demands and encounter unexpected obstacles. Both sports teams and work teams encounter adversity—barriers, challenges and setbacks.

Teams that encounter adversity may slide down a slippery slope of confusion, conflict, finger-pointing and lasting failure. Yet some teams are particularly adept at dealing with adversity. Teams that recover from all kinds of adversity are called “resilient teams.” Resilient teams show the capacity to bounce back and return to or even exceed their prior levels of performance.

Benson Rosen and Bradley L. Kirkman sought to understand what it takes to build a resilient team. To do so, they collected data from almost 2,000
college coaches on how to build team resilience. Coaches’ strategies for building resilient teams were summarized into five categories. The implications of coaches’ insights for building and sustaining resilient work teams, for each of these strategies, is detailed below.

**KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

1. Recruit resilient players. Coaches stressed the importance of recruiting team members who have the maturity, mental toughness, work ethic and track record to stay strong in the face of adversity. Human resource managers and team leaders can use assessment instruments to identify potential team members who demonstrate such characteristics as conscientiousness, emotional stability, openness to new experiences and learning orientations, for example. Just as coaches interview prospective players, work team leaders can employ a variety of behavioral and situational interview techniques to help predict which candidates for team membership will demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity.

2. Shape the team culture to value trust, respect and honesty. Coaches identify the values that will guide the team through good times and bad. For example, one sports team reported that their philosophy, “no challenge is permanent and no obstacle is unconquerable,” contributed to their team’s resilience. Similarly, team leaders are well positioned to shape their teams’ cultures. Leaders can ask their teams to prepare mission statements with their guiding values. The values are reinforced through mottos, stories and rituals designed to celebrate the values. Positive values help teams work through adversity and bounce back.

3. Focus on team accountability. According to coaches, teams must accept responsibility for poor performance and demand more from themselves in the face of adversity. Leaders of work teams also must emphasize accountability, where members take responsibility for mistakes, confront underperformers and commit to do better. For both coaches and work team leaders, personal accountability and team accountability are important enablers of team resilience.

4. Practice responses to simulated adversities. Coaches created simulated adversities in practice sessions to help prepare their teams for the real thing. In some instances, coaches held out key players to simulate injuries, practiced in adverse weather, simulated unfair officiating and created extreme time pressures, among other adversities. Work team leaders can use computer simulations or outdoor challenges to simulate team adversities, including resource scarcities, key members leaving the team or unexpected time pressures, for example. Lessons learned about how to cope with simulated adversity should better prepare teams to respond to real-life setbacks.

5. Manage the external environment. Through interventions with outside stakeholders, including fans, athletic directors and the media, coaches buffer their teams and acquire more time and resources to help teams work through difficult times. Similarly, work team leaders may work outside the team boundaries to recruit new members, negotiate deadline extensions and acquire technological support that is needed to help the team work through difficult periods. Coaches and team leaders contribute to team resilience by actively managing the context within which their teams function.

Sports teams and work teams share many similarities. Accordingly, it would be shortsighted to ignore the insights of college coaches. The lessons learned from sports coaches provide valuable insights on how work team leaders can immunize their teams against adversity, build resilience and sustain success.
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