WHITE PAPER

Winning the talent retention game

Retaining talent in councils: the problem is real

No other organisation has such a close and daily relationship with their customers and community as local government. With services like rubbish collection, libraries, pools, roading, water and infrastructure, parks, housing, consents, and environmental management, the touchpoints are many, varied, and frequent.

Collectively Australia's local governments employ approximately 200,000 people in more than 400 occupations, and in many communities are the largest employer. However, Australia's 537 councils are facing a jobs and skills crisis that is only getting worse*.

Australia's local government organisations are extremely challenged by the current skills shortage sweeping the country. Talent retention has been a major focus for councils as they find their talent pool becoming a rich hunting ground for recruiters from state, federal, and private sector employers.

The situation couldn't be more severe; according to Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) nearly every council is facing job and skills shortages, and not surprisingly it is starting to have an impact on work programmes and councils' ability to deliver for the community. Two-thirds of councils report that local projects are either impacted or delayed due to job vacancies, skills shortages, skills gaps and training needs. The predominant factors influencing skills shortages are a tight labour market for skilled workers, funding certainty, an inability for councils to compete with private sector remuneration, and locational disadvantages.

Not only that, alarm bells are ringing from a new survey from the Australian Service Union reporting that nearly one in two overworked local government workers in South Australia say they have been bullied at work, and 84 per cent of workers in the same survey agree that their workloads had increased in the last three years and 50 per cent saying it had considerably increased.

All told, it sounds like the ingredients for a pretty awful recipe...not enough people, stress and increased risk of burnout, projects off track, and unmet community expectations left, right, and centre.

The slowing economy, rising interest rates, and a cost of living crisis are being felt by workers everywhere – but perhaps no more so than in local government where it may not be possible to respond to market pressure on remuneration and benefits. Nationally the employee turnover rate in local government is about 15 percent, and in rural areas it's closer to 20 percent, according to ALGA.

In response to churn and long standing vacancies, council leaders may find themselves forced into promoting technical experts into leadership positions before they are ready, without vital people management and leadership skills. This can compound and create new issues for already stressed and overworked teams.

ALGA in a submission to the productivity commission last year noted that many local councils were facing financial challenges, impacting service delivery and the ability to attract and retain qualified staff.

Local government workers across the country will welcome the news that New South Wales is moving on public sector wages, as a first step to resolve essential worker recruitment and retention challenges, and hope that it will have a sector wide effect.

But in the meantime, councils still have to respond to burning platform of talent retention.

Mind the gap :
How you can lead to retain

We all know there's a better way and that is getting your people to choose to stay. But that's easier said than done. What are the specific aspects of leadership and culture that make the biggest differences and what parts are our people telling us we are not doing well enough in?

We've taken a look at the biggest differences in questions between our customers' onboarding and offboarding results and have some tips to get your people to stay. This tells their story of what people expected going into an organisation, one week into their role, and their feelings when they left.

Leadership

	ENTRY		EXIT	DOWN

The organisation's culture was what I expected to be — 81% → 62% ↓19%

Our organisation is a great place to work — 83% → 65% ↓19%

I have/had the resources and support necessary to be effective in my role — 80% → 65% ↓15%

My manager supports me in my role — 88% → 73% ↓15%

The organisation's vision and values align with my own personal purpose — 88% → 73% ↓15%

We've all heard the wonderful truism that people leave managers not organisations. So are the issues in your organisation systemic or in certain teams/roles/departments and how do you know?

Remember that giddy feeling when you land a new job? You've had your interview, the place sounds like it was made for you and you can't wait to get started. But then over weeks, months or sometimes years, slowly the honeymoon period comes to an end as perception has not met reality? We've probably all experienced it at one time or another and it can make you rethink your choices.

TOP TIP: Always make sure the position description aligns with the role you are interviewing for.

Be open and honest about the true situation of the organisation, its challenges and make sure anything that is not working well is understood from day dot.

TOP TIP: Don't wait until someone resigns to find out how they feel about the organisation as a place to work.

By the time they have resigned it's too late. Ask regularly. If the responses aren't as expected, take a deep dive as to why. Is it leadership or management driven, is it organisational wide, is there just pockets of people feeling this way or is it the feelings of one or a handful of individuals? In the war for talent, word of mouth is crucially important when people are seeking referrals.
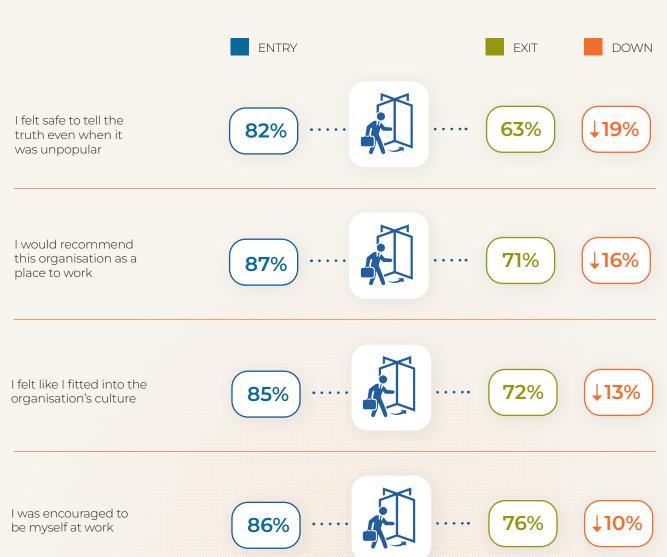
TOP TIP: Create an open environment where your team can share their views on where things are not quite as they should be.

Set time aside at your one-on-one meetings to specifically cover off how your team member is feeling. Then talk about any issues generally as a team encourage them to share your views. Things can't be fixed if they're not reported as broken.

Culture

	ENTRY		EXIT	DOWN

I felt safe to tell the truth even when it was unpopular
82% · · · · · 63% ↓19%

I would recommend this organisation as a place to work
87% · · · · · 71% ↓16%

I felt like I fitted into the organisation's culture
85% · · · · · 72% ↓13%

I was encouraged to be myself at work
86% · · · · · 76% ↓10%

TOP TIP: Address poor behaviour early.

Always a tricky one when any poor performance is dealt with behind closed doors and is a confidential conversation between a leader and a team member. However, a new employee will want to see any instances addressed quickly and then see a change in behaviour. Monitor changes in behaviour yourself and if they are not being seen, or unexpected changes, follow up. If positive change is being seen, acknowledge it and when appropriate, offer praise.
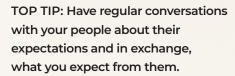
TOP TIP: Let your people know their worth.

Regularly review performance and offer praise where it is due. Sometimes a simple thank you is all it takes for someone to feel valued and respected. Don't wait until you receive a resignation letter to offer people what you think they are worth. Keep your eye on the market and reward when necessary.

TOP TIP: Be clear about the purpose of the organisation and what it is trying to achieve.

When a team member feels aligned to the purpose, magic can happen. Misalignment can be highly destructive. Be clear what the organisation's values are, and if at development stage, do it from the bottom up. People want to see the golden thread, how it connects to vision/purpose and how what they do, contributes to it.

TOP TIP: Have regular conversations with your people about their expectations and in exchange, what you expect from them.

It is awfully hard to met expectations if your you don't know what they are. The expectations from your people won't always be realistic and that's ok. But at least by taking the time to listen and hear what your team have to say you can acknowledge what they are feeling and look for opportunities for improvement. You don't need to provide a response immediately so say when you need time to think about a response. Don't be afraid to say no, but when you do be ready to back it up with the why. Don't let your team member think everything is going great if its not. People, just like leaders, can't change if they don't know where they need to improve. Constructive feedback is always a gift. It either reinforces the good things you're doing or helps you identify how you can get even better. Don't let the gap between reality and expectation get to big if you want your team to feel empowered and engaged. Talk about the environment the organisation is operating in, how it is changing and how they, as an individual can make a positive impact and keep checking in.

TOP TIP: Psychological safety is a must. Providing an environment where people feel they can share their views openly and honestly, particularly when it may come to sensitive issues such as bullying, harassment or intimidating behaviour is critical to your organisation's success.

You need to provide a safe environment and processes, for them to provide their feedback, Listen to what they have to say and then take action to make improvements. If you're not sure how, run an anonymised survey to take the pulse of the organisation. Sometimes it is the only way to uncover the truth. People who feel valued and respected at work feel a higher degree of loyalty and are more likely to stay. Most importantly, when someone raises an issue new or current, ensure there are ABSOLUTELY no recriminations. It's the only way to build loyalty and trust.

ASK YOUR TEAM

It all starts with asking the right questions of your people

AskYourTeam is uniquely placed to help councils understand and respond to their challenges – be it with community delivery, productivity and culture, retention, or leadership development. Over the past 10 years we have forged partnerships with two-thirds of councils in New Zealand, helping them to be more productive, create better leaders, and delivering insights that drive transformational change. And now we are doing the same for Australia's local government organisations.

Our employee experience platform helps drive meaningful change across organisations. By asking the right questions and providing a safe way for the workforce to share their views, we help you to really understand what they think, and feel. And most importantly, where improvements can be made. After all, who knows more about what's working and what isn't, than the team at the front line?

By involving your people in a more meaningful way, they'll feel part of the process of improvement rather than it being 'done to them'. Results allow you to pinpoint exactly where the issues are, and address them. And then later, to re-test to understand how well the initiatives that have been put in place are working so they can course correct if required.

Question sets are based on factors proven by independent research to drive productivity and wellbeing and of course can be tailored to dive deep into the unique areas that matter most to your teams and organisation. Armed with deep insights, action can be swift, targeted and most importantly evidence based.

Psychological safety is a critical concept in the workplace, for workers and teams, and the people leading them. Anonymised surveys and reporting give the freedom and space for honest insights. Giving people permission to be candid – without repercussions – even when delivering bad news, transforms culture, and delivers gold nuggets of insight.

Leaders will be able to really understand what's going on, where the issues are and whether the challenges are systemic or confined to certain teams or leaders. Armed with this knowledge, we help you create smarter action plans to drive meaningful and ongoing improvements and tackle the gnarliest of problems.

A new tool to reel in retention

Working on the premise that it's always easier to keep the talent that you have rather than recruit, there's more that councils can do improve tenure and reduce churn, and it comes down to managing expectations.

We examined our local government clients' onboarding and exit surveys to understand the gap between people's expectations on arrival, versus their feelings when they left. It highlighted two main areas of focus for retention; psychological safety – feeling safe to tell the truth even when it is unpopular – and manager's support of their people.

Taking our support for local government talent retention issues even further, AskYourTeam has developed a new survey to help local government leaders and HR teams better understand the issue in their council.

This new offering adds to our existing onboarding and exit surveys, providing an end-to-end set of tools to track employee sentiment over their time with your council. By getting really frank and regular feedback about how people are feeling you'll be able to respond faster, base your actions on hard evidence, and ensure that your efforts to find and attract people to your council aren't wasted.

Our retention survey will help to quantify retention risk by asking anonymously whether people are thinking of leaving your organisation. You'll understand whether people still feel connected to the organisation, whether they are fulfilled in their work, and if they are thinking about leaving, what would encourage them to stay.

By slicing and dicing data, you can pinpoint where the greatest flight risks lie, and gain an understanding of root cause, both at an organisational and team level, so specific and targeted action can be taken.

Taking a head in the sand approach is not going to solve the retention challenge. Neither is finding out – on departure – how people feel about your organisation as a place to work. It's simply too late in the game to make a difference. You're likely to repeat the same mistakes with the next crop of new hires. Instead, we recommend asking regularly, and diving deep where issues are flagged.

Leadership development

We can support both first time leaders and established leaders
to be successful by identifying:

- Where each team leader is strong

- Where they need to improve

- What their specific development needs are.

We can also support their leadership journey by providing customised
leadership training and development based on their survey results.

A critical factor in the AskYourTeam approach is ensuring that all people
have a genuine and safe platform to speak; not just about how they feel,
but to continuously evaluate organisational performance and share ideas and
solutions on all aspects of the organisation, including leadership effectiveness.

Although potentially confronting, collating and analysing multiple perspectives
from the people we lead enhances key aspects such as self-awareness and
leadership alignment. Responding effectively to these insights with actions,
including going back to people for their ideas and solutions, is often the most
powerful thing leaders can do to establish themselves as authentic leaders with
strong relational leadership.

Data shows that employees feel valued in feedback-led organisations. With
the support of AskYourTeam your council can build a culture of openness and
transparency which in turn supports talent retention and attraction and
helps gain valuable ground in the war for talent.

ALGA October 2022 Submission to the Productivity Commission

If you'd like to find out how we can make a difference in
your council just AskYourTeam: info@askyourteam.com

Want to know more?

AskYourTeam is the employee experience platform that gives your council the edge. Your needs are front and centre, so you get the actionable insights you need to really drive up productivity, retention and wellbeing in your council

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