

Why retention is a mixed bag for one of the UK's oldest charities



Over the last few decades, charities have shaken off their worthy, well-meaning image and now operate along the same lines as any corporate organisation. There are some differences of course but fundamentally the issues are the same and HR is no exception.

Founded in 1884, the NSPCC is one of this country's oldest charities and is at the forefront of child protection and prevention of cruelty to children. Now it has been joined by ChildLine, it employs just under 2,000 people turning over around £20 million each year.

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Liz Booth is the charity's HR Director and, together with her team of forty people, she covers strategy, training, policies and practice, staffing matters as well as organisation review and design. Recruitment is regarded as a line management function, although the HR team has been much more involved recently.

Having worked for some of the UK's largest corporations as well as other charities, Liz knows first-hand what the main differences are.

Wanted: exceptional people and a constant stream of ideas

“There is a different kind of cost consciousness when it comes to spending money,” she admits. “You have a large sense of moral duty to your donors for one thing.”

In terms of size, Liz likens the NSPCC to the social services department of a large London borough. She acknowledges that it is not big enough to run services across the country to deal with the 400,000 children on the at risk register. Instead the approach is to set up projects that demonstrate particularly good practice, as well as new and innovative ways of working.

“To do this the NSPCC needs exceptional people and a steady flow of fresh ideas,” she says.

“We need people who enjoy change and who are exploring the boundaries all the time, so we need to attract a particular type of talented person.”



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Because the NSPCC's work covers an extraordinary range, it needs creative and flexible people who are happy to work in diverse situations and with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and circumstances.

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Re-evaluating recruitment

Within the NSPCC, line managers have direct responsibility for recruiting their staff. However, recently the HR team has been more involved than normal at the interview stage. This is because value based interviewing is being trialled in response to a particular child protection report. Being involved has shown Liz that practices vary widely and, in some cases, fall short of what is needed.

“I believe absolutely that you need to give managers the right to manage their people. That includes selecting them,” she asserts. “I loathe the idea of HR muscling in and telling managers who they should and shouldn't recruit. But in delivering on that I've probably allowed my department to stand too far back. It's time for a fresh look at recruitment.”

The re-evaluation has already started with the introduction of a fully integrated e-recruitment system. The system gives a large amount of control over data which can be mined to find really useful information which improves recruitment.


As you would expect, child protection checks carried out on staff are cutting-edge.

“We simply don't take short-cuts,” says Liz. “But it does mean that the lead time for getting a social worker appointed, trained and developed and working is extremely long which is one of the reasons we are beginning to think about retention as an equal partner to recruitment.”

“People are often promoted without first getting the necessary coaching they need to manage staff.”

Retention is a mixed bag

Liz believes that retaining staff is the result of having highly motivated, value driven employees who feel they are getting a fair deal. As the result of conversations with TalentDrain she admits the organisation has started to think as much about retention as it does about recruitment.



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However, there are very unique differences that impact on recruitment and retention, determined by the charity's mission to end cruelty to children. Talented staff are positively encouraged to take up secondments to other organisations whose work benefits children and helps to end cruelty. Of course these secondments have a huge impact on the organisation and Liz admits it can get mission critical on occasions:

"But this is where we dramatically differ from a commercial organisation. Retention is a mixed bag for us; first and foremost, we have to consider what is best for our organisational aims: they force us to think beyond the business."

An objective view of retention

The NSPCC needs to employ large numbers of fundraisers. The fundraisers present a challenge of their own: largely junior staff, they tend to be young and mobile. Tracking these employees and understanding what makes them leave is important.

"That's how we got involved with TalentDrain", says Liz. "We wanted to understand what might cause people to leave at the wrong point. It is important to track turnover rates, in different age

groups and tenures of staff, quite carefully. We try to make a distinction between turnover that we think is OK and what isn't.


"Using TalentDrain's new joiner questionnaire, FirstImpression, the NSPCC was able to examine how well people were greeted and inducted into the organisation. In addition the charity has also started to use the exit interview tool to understand in more detail about people's reasons for leaving.

"The online exit interview works well. People are more honest than they would be face-to-face so you can build up a clear picture of what's going on," says Liz.

"The range of questions really does make people think and gives feedback in a way that the traditional exit interview can't.

"To an extent when the right type of people leave, but go on to work in other child protection related jobs, it doesn't feel so bad. What does feel bad is when they go on to non-relevant jobs."

"Getting those early weeks right is something we need to work on."



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Discovering what staff really want

The first batch of results from the exit interview highlighted a difference between the organisation's assumptions and the reality. There was a belief that people were leaving once they had got the training under their belts for higher salaries elsewhere. However when asked to rank what was important to them, although money was an issue, training and development, together with 'being heard' were rated higher.

"When asked to rate their affinity with the cause it was very, very high but I guess we should have expected that people want to work for the NSPCC for reasons other than money," Liz admits. "The survey has helped us spot this. It will help us to develop methods that will deal with retention issues. We are in the process of developing strategies such as greater flexibility which I think will be of interest to people.

"We have been able to identify what the issues are and to see where we aren't doing so well, in a way that is neutral for people. TalentDrain's independence is important too."

The charity uses other survey tools to canvas staff opinion. One of the surveys has led to a complete review of how people are settled into the organisation. A new induction programme is being tested to see if it improves matters.

"We want to give people the best possible start in the organisation," says Liz. "One of the things the TalentDrain work tells us is that people make the decision to leave the organisation incredibly early.

"Getting those early weeks right is something we need to work on."


ChildLine staff are being surveyed at the moment and Liz believes the results will give a good insight into the culture of the newly merged organisation.

"The need to tell staff about our successes... cannot be underestimated"

Communication, inclusion and flexibility: encouraging people to stay

Training and development is important to staff retention but the NSPCC also places a great deal of emphasis on internal communication.

"The need to tell staff about our successes, the differences we have made and each person's contribution cannot be underestimated," Liz asserts. "It helps generate a sense of pride in working for our organisation. It also tells staff about child protection and about why they should be proud to work for NSPCC in a way that an email can't."



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Internal communication is just one element of the charity's retention strategy. Staff are also encouraged to contribute to organisational strategy through focus groups and presentations.

When asked what most made them want to stay with the NSPCC, most people cited the approach to flexibility together with training and development.

"Flexible working is very important to people, especially those who have children," Liz states.

"It's about trying to fit in with people's real lives and we work hard to do this. We believe that family life should be respected."

"We work hard to create an inclusive environment where people feel they belong; where each member of staff feels they are making a positive contribution to our goal: to end cruelty to children."

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