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Acquisition and Retention of Skilled Employees: A Study of International Companies in Rural Giles County, Tennessee

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Abstract

The U.S. manufacturing industry produces goods that are shipped all over the world. Because of the shortage of skilled labor, some manufacturing human resource professionals lack the strategies and processes necessary to acquire and retain skilled employees, and this challenge is particularly true in rural areas where economies are more dependent on manufacturing. For this qualitative multiple-case study, data were gathered from a population of manufacturing human resource professionals working for international companies with a presence in rural Giles County, Tennessee. Guided by Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, the purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore the strategies and processes manufacturing human resource professionals use to acquire and retain skilled employees. Data were collected from individual interviews and a focus group. Using the modified van Kaam method of data analysis, two themes emerged as key strategies to acquire and retain skilled employees: company culture and succession. The data from this study may contribute to business practices in manufacturing industries or human resource management. The implications for positive social change include the potential for the rural community to become more attractive for other industries and to improve the quality of life for individuals who reside in the community.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Beginning in the 21st century, manufacturing human resource professionals

faced an increasingly aging workforce, lack of appropriately qualified employees, and difficulty recruiting and maintaining the workforces because of the retirement of the Baby Boomer generation (Stettner & Yudken, 2019). Schramm & Figueiredo (2020) indicate that 37.3% of the U.S. essential workforce are age 50 and older and nearly 15% are age 60 or older. Human resource professionals in manufacturing must now understand what strategies are necessary to recruit and retain skilled employees to replace an aging workforce. Furthermore, many rural counties in America are reliant upon manufacturing (Dobis, 2021) thus retention is critical.

The issue of a declining skilled workforce has been increasing since the 2000s (Stettner & Yudken, 2019). The consequence of not addressing the issue of a declining skilled workforce is that unless an organization has the necessary workforce, it cannot be competitive (Orvitz, 2018; Snell & Morris, 2019). Manufacturing human resource professionals who attempted to educate or train the workforce have received mixed results. After training, the newly skilled individual often relocates or moves to a different company for higher wages (Acharya et al., 2021).

In the 1980s, the function of human resource professionals was typically administrative or supportive. The role started to change in the 1990s as personnel shortages affected organizations' strategic priorities (Venne & Hannay, 2018). The need for skilled employees meant that human resource professionals were increasingly included in the key conversation and started to help define and develop organizational core competencies (Tilca et al., 2018). Since the 1990s, companies have transitioned into talent wars, where manufacturing human resource professionals compete fiercely for individuals who have specialized knowledge and expertise (Buder & Kittinger-Rosanelli, 2021; Öznurlular, 2022).

Then the global pandemic impacted global business like nothing in recent memory. Eventually, this black swan event gave way and the global economy started to recover (International Monetary Fund, 2021). As it did, businesses and governments began to realize there was another issue (Ahn & Menichini, 2022) People were not coming back to the workforce, and markets that are normally resilient to global economic influences were impacted as well (Karan & Asgari, 2021).

An organization's manufacturing human resource professionals must have a better understanding of not only how to acquire new talent, but also how to keep that talent. Also, manufacturing human resource professionals must do so while overcoming an aging workforce and lack of skilled employees by finding ways to acquire and retain the younger generation (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore what strategies and processes manufacturing human resource professionals use to acquire and retain skilled employees. The specific population consisted of manufacturing human resource professionals who successfully used strategies to acquire and retain skilled employees in rural Giles County, Tennessee. The study may con-

tribute to social change by providing local manufacturing human resource professionals with the strategies and processes to acquire and retain skilled labor. A town or community may become more desirable to other manufacturers when an adequate skilled workforce is in place (Butler et al., 2020). New or vibrant manufacturers reduce unemployment and increase the standard of living and tax base (Hobbs, 2021). A higher tax base allows for better education and municipal improvements that may enrich the lives in the area (Helpap, 2022).

The central research question for this article is what strategies and processes manufacturing human resource professionals use to acquire and retain skilled employees.

2. Literature Review

The literature review was initiated by describing the business problem within the context of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959). These theories were reviewed considering an examination of human capital theory (Thornton, 2021). Researchers using human capital theory focus on attributes and traits necessary to evaluate labor, so it produces an economic value—not how to acquire and retain labor (Ray et al., 2022). Through the literature review process and the use of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory, three major elements were discovered for consideration: 1) aging workforce, 2) current best practices of workforce retention, and 3) succession planning.

The topic of workforce management pertained to a considerable body of knowledge. For this study, three meta-concepts of workforce management were used to guide the literature review research. These concepts were an aging workforce, workforce retention, and succession planning. For the topics on the aging workforce, the causes of the aging workforce, its physical and mental effects on the workforce and companies, and the talent drain as the generation retires were all revealed. In the workforce retention section, the topics include methods used to retain the older skilled workforce. Manufacturing human resource managers, and in turn business leaders, should understand the need and potential for improvement even with methods in use at the beginning of the 21st century. Strategies for succession, planning, and communication that business leaders must use within a multigenerational workforce are in the final section (Tilca et al., 2018). The Industrial Revolution brought forth the beginning of the skills gap within the United States workforce. The trend has continued and is the reason many jobs are unfilled, and unemployment has remained high (Stettner & Yudken, 2019).

This discussion of the meta-concept of the aging workforce includes retirement rates, as well as the mental and physical effects of aging. Retirement rates directly affect an organization's workforce by limiting the talent. The Baby Boomer cohorts' aging poses challenges for the Baby Boomers and business organizations (Bernsen et al., 2020). By understanding retirement rates and the mental

and physical effects of aging, manufacturing human resource professionals can prepare for the changing workforce (Wisse et al., 2018).

Research is abundant on the ominous topic regarding the demographic shifts apparent within the workforce (Schramm & Figueiredo, 2020). Manufacturing human resource managers worldwide are facing a wave of aging. In addition, the Baby Boomer cohorts are creating challenges within society and business organizations. The future success of manufacturing human resource professionals and organizations depends on understanding and retaining this demographic (Tang & Jorge, 2021).

Even with the abundance of written literature, manufacturing human resource professionals continue to struggle with having adequate personnel during this historic change within the U.S. workforce. An unprecedented demographic change emerged during the latter half of the 20th century. This demographic change continues and has been increased due to the global pandemic and will have a far-reaching effect on businesses (Ahn & Menichini, 2022).

The workforce participation impact of COVID-19 cannot be ignored. At its height, it is estimated that 14 million people in the United States had lost their jobs directly or indirectly due to the COVID-19 crisis (Pew Research Center, 2020a). The unemployment rate rapidly changed going from its record low in February 2020 of 3.8% to 13% in three months (Pew Research Center, 2020b). That unemployment rate significantly surpasses the unemployment rate during the Great Recession (Pew Research Center, 2020a). During this same time, skilled workers were not offered the same job flexibility as other employees. It is estimated that 38 million workers left the workforce in what became known as the "Great Resignation". The relatively flat rate of 15.5 percent of the population in retirement jumped to 19.3 percent in August 2021 (Faria e Castro, 2021).

The potential loss of knowledge and the availability of skilled employees are critical for businesses and organizations. Not addressing these threats jeopardizes business success (Marx et al., 2020). The continual increase in the median age of the U.S. population has substantial direct and indirect effects on profit and production for businesses and the economy (Irby, 2020). As the population ages, so does the median age of the workforce, thus increasing the number of working individuals who could leave the workforce.

The aging Baby Boomer population is now reaching retirement age and is beginning to leave the workforce voluntarily. As the average workforce age increases, so will retirement rates for key positions within an organization (Orvitz, 2018). The mass exodus of a retiring workforce will create a higher demand for skilled individuals. The increased demand will soon surpass the number of qualified and willing candidates, creating workforce shortages within the industry and negatively affecting an organization's performance (Orvitz, 2018).

The population of the United States is aging, which is evident in the business setting as the median or average age of the workforce rises. Retirement is a protracted and multistep process, whereas previously the event was a singular, mo-

mentous affair (Stark & Poppler, 2018). The increasing average age implies that more of the workforce has the potential to retire and take with it the knowledge and skills accumulated for decades. The potential workforce exodus could leave manufacturing human resource professionals with a lack of knowledge and skills necessary to run a successful organization (Profiroiu et al., 2020).

As the workforce ages, so do the mental abilities of employees. Manufacturing human resource professionals worry that if younger workers do not become available, then the knowledge and skills within the organization are lost (Dorien et al., 2020). Good mental health allows a person to feel confident, more relaxed in stressful situations, and able to overcome life's tasks or small problems more quickly (Bachus et al., 2021). Understanding the mental effects of aging is important for manufacturing human resource professionals to understand the signs and possible outcomes on the aging workforce (Dorien et al., 2020).

Workforce mental health is a business issue that needs attention. Each year, lawsuits revolve around an employee suing an employer for the appearance of discrimination because of mental health issues (Dorien et al., 2020). Mental illness is a biologically based disorder that may disrupt an individual's ability to feel, think, perceive the world, or relate to others. Mental illness is the second leading disability in the United States next to heart disease. An extensive range of symptoms exists that an older worker may exhibit. These symptoms vary between individuals and depend on a person's general health and other aging factors (Lang & Kell, 2020). A worker who experiences mental health issues might face additional challenges when returning to or entering the workplace (Dorien et al., 2020). Workforce or management shunning, underutilizing, or misunderstanding an individual with an issue is common (Rauvola et al., 2020). Businesses have to employ, train, or engage outside services when dealing with mental health issues to avoid or mitigate the potential for litigation (Lang & Kell, 2020).

Business organizations must be aware of the effects that an aging workforce will have on the success of the organization. Aging is a natural process that transpires differently for each person. Physiological aging is the changes that occur in the functioning and structure of the body during a lifetime (Vilčiauskaitė et al., 2020). The changes that occur during physiological aging are involuntary and may occur slowly while others happen during a short period. This multidimensional progression of aging affects an individual's health status and day-to-day functions (Wisse et al., 2018). The process varies depending on the environment, cultural factors, and genetics. In some cases, the process of aging has a negative effect on the individual's physical performance and potentially the company's bottom line (Therady, 2022). These concerns became more evident during and after the global pandemic (Osborn et al., 2022).

Historically, business did not have to worry about the age of its workforce. The organization could expect a new generation or cohort to replace its existing workforce (Pahos & Galanaki, 2019). This natural occurrence continued until

the arrival of one of the largest cohorts of the 1940s, frequently denoted as the Baby Boomer generation (Radu & Radu, 2014). The aging of this cohort was the catalyst that has precipitated the lack of skilled employees, which businesses and society acknowledge. Because the younger generation lacks the skills or desire to enter skilled trades, businesses are facing a problem previously unknown within modern business history (Yamada & Otchia, 2021).

The size of the Baby Boomer generation makes it difficult for the other cohorts to offset the Baby Boomers exodus from the workforce. According to other researchers, many organizations have underestimated or even ignored the physical and mental changes beginning to affect the skilled workforce (Martinson et al., 2020). Also, the potential loss of critical knowledge and experiences when the Baby Boomers depart could cause potential detrimental knowledge and skill gaps (Yamada & Otchia, 2021). Researchers of the peer-reviewed articles in the aging workforce element explored retirement rates, physical effects, and mental effects of aging (Martinson et al., 2020; Schramm & Figueiredo, 2020; Tang & Jorge, 2021). Maslow proposed that movement through the hierarchy is a process of adult development and as such higher-order needs for self-actualization and affiliation have a tendency to occur in later adulthood, succeeding the accomplishments of lower-order needs during early adulthood (1943). The authors of these peer-reviewed articles have not provided information concerning proactive methods for offsetting these effects on older skilled workforce members (Marx et al., 2020). Also, a lack of documentation exists regarding how the retirement of the Baby Boomers influences other generations within the skilled workforce (Guzeller & Celiker, 2020; Irby, 2020).

Within the workforce, fundamental changes that could radically alter how companies relate to the workforce are taking place. Understanding what motivates the aging workforce to remain active is essential to any manager or business leader (Guzeller & Celiker, 2020). Retaining employees poses a challenge to employers, even those offering attractive pay and benefits (Aburub, 2020). The retention of employees, especially of the skilled or most valuable employees, is a primary challenge to organizations. By retaining key employees, organizational leaders ensure the long-term success and health of the organizations (Tang & Jorge, 2021).

As the workforce became more diverse, the government created rules and regulations to prevent discrimination. The perception of discrimination became directed toward selective groups by business owners. This process has created more burdens on organizational leaders, according to Zipper (2022). The first phase of racial workforce diversity took place within the last half of the 20th century. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 qualified discrimination in matters of employment based on color, race, religion, and the nation of origin (Novikoff, 2022). This Act provided the government with the ability to both withhold resources from programs that discriminate and to sue public facilities that discriminate based on a person's race, age, or gender (Zipper, 2022). Also, manufac-

turing human resource professionals have become alarmed at the potential consequences of sexual harassment within the workforce (Novikoff, 2022). In the new Millennium, with similarities in both the workforce and population demographics, the likelihood of interoffice relationships or harassment increases. One individual might consider a comment to be neutral rather than offensive or unwanted attention.

At no other time in history have manufacturing human resource professionals experienced such a diversity of generations within the workforce. Beginning in the first 10 years of the 21st century, four unique and remarkably distinct cohorts coexisted within the workplace (Peretz et al., 2022). Each cohort had dramatically different attitudes, values, needs, expectations, and motivations. Manufacturing human resource professionals found it more difficult to manage and incorporate these varying attitudes into a positive corporate culture (Thornton, 2021). At the beginning of the 21st century, an increase in third-party organizations that specialized in blending cohorts within a workplace environment occurred. Insight into these differences among cohorts allowed leaders and, in turn, organizations to comprehend the expectations, motivations, and other driving factors of the multigenerational workforce (Peretz et al., 2022).

Manufacturing organizations with human resource professionals who understand the legal concerns and the needs of the multigenerational and mixed-gender workforce may have an organization that has a higher profit and better sustainability. A moderate level of turnover is healthy for business (Profiroiu et al., 2020). Turnover within an organization provides opportunities for the recruitment of individuals from a generation who bring new and fresh perspectives to assimilate into the organization's product or culture. Higher level management should learn why the workforce is leaving and develop a strategy to retain its high performers to maintain a competitive edge (Therady, 2022).

Technology and society are making the Monday through Friday workweek obsolete and counterproductive. Workplace flexibility defines how, where, and when to work. The concept of workplace flexibility is becoming a critical part of workforce performance and well-being (Ray et al., 2022). The force behind the concept is the shifting personal demographic and professional choices of the modern workforce. The black swan event of the global pandemic proved to business and employees that flexibility is a new possibility (Osborn et al., 2022).

To retain the necessary workforce, manufacturing human resource professionals may have to rethink the traditional 9 - 5, 40-hour workweek. The ubiquitous 40-hour week did not emerge until after World War II (Peretz et al., 2022). The rest of the 20th-century employees and employers witnessed a decline in the average of hours worked. Individuals who matured during this same period have continued the trend, and as the group reaches retirement age, the cohort wishes to have more time or flexibility to do other things (Orvitz, 2018). The members of the non-Baby Boomer cohort create purpose and identify with the profession. Since the pandemic the popularity of workplace flexibility has

gained enough attention that companies have addressed workplace flexibility by providing rules and regulations for their employees (Frank, 2021).

A recent trend in business organizations is position or title flexibility. If a person's wish to care for his or her family goes unfulfilled, then he or she may leave the organization. To accommodate the requirements of the worker, the organization either creates a new part-time position or allows an individual to job share with individuals who also wish to work part-time (Pabilonia, 2022). A part-time position or job share for an individual allows the organization to retain the knowledge and avoid the cost of finding and hiring someone else who may not have the skills essential to accomplish the duties necessary for the job.

The rapid development of technology has provided organizations with another option for workplace flexibility, especially post COVID-19 pandemic. Home-based work or telecommuting is an arrangement between the organization and individual, in which the individual does not travel to a location to perform work (Mullins et al., 2022). The individual does not have to remain at home and may use mobile devices to perform work from any place that has a connection to the Internet. Telecommuting is a method of work common in foreign countries, including those located in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Manufacturing human resource professionals also have the option to place highly valued individuals on retainer and give these individuals a mobile device on an as-needed basis (Minkus et al., 2022). A retainer allows the organization to maintain access to the knowledge and skills the individuals possess.

To remain or to become successful, an organization must have abundant manufacturing human resources. The function of manufacturing human resource management is the recurring evaluation and motivation of employees within the workplace (Moser, 2022). Additionally, the organization must ensure that the workplace environment is safe and meets the legal requirements to prevent litigation (Wolff, 2022). Therefore, human resource managers serve as leaders in business and the duties of these managers are a critical part of an organization's success (Harrington, 2022).

Managing conflict within the workplace is a continually increasing task for employers. To protect the organization and its business leaders, manufacturing human resource departments manage and defuse issues with legal implications (Guzeller & Celiker, 2020). Such actions allow a quicker response to deal with an issue before it evolves into a major organizational issue. The benefit to the company is two-fold. First, this response ensures that issues within the organization conclude before escalating to include other departments or the whole company (Gilmartin et al., 2022). Such a response reduces both the possibility that an employee or employees will become dissatisfied and leave the company. Second, by containing moral or legal issues, the manufacturing human resource manager mitigates the possibility of legal repercussions that could cost the company additional resources and enhance the likelihood of having to replace a key employee (Burke & Grandey, 2020).

Successful business leaders assign a new and pivotal role in manufacturing human resource management regarding the mitigation of legal issues or concerns. The rapidly changing and litigious environment is not an excuse for misconduct (Zipper, 2022). Business organizations that excel at mitigating risk review the policies of the organization continually. A continual review process is not the same as the periodic process recommended by the Department of Labor (Novikoff, 2022). A perpetual or continual review process constantly communicates the organization's expectations and the values of the company's operations. If a manufacturing human resource manager recognizes a gap resulting from either a culture shift or a change in the law, business leaders should be aware of this because the resource manager or the business may face unneeded legal woes (Zipper, 2022).

In an attempt to retain the older workforce, organizations have begun to increase the focus on evolving workforce management capabilities and processes. The process begins with upper management obtaining a better understanding of the generational, ethical, and gender makeup of its workforce (Peretz et al., 2022). Once management has a clearer understanding of the motivational factors within its workplace, leaders may be able to offer incentives and options that historically have not been available. Because of the changing working environment, continual attention and change have become indispensable. For this reason, the policies and procedures of an organization need continual review and improvement (Rusu, 2022).

The U.S. workforce consists of people who reflect the population of the country as opposed to a single demographic. Authors of the peer-reviewed articles failed to address how this new workforce composition personally affects skilled individuals in the organization and its influence regarding retention and acquisition (Bachus et al., 2021; Terry et al., 2021). Additionally, other authors did not address methods or ways that manufacturing human resource professionals can positively influence a skilled workforce (Dorien et al., 2020; Osborn et al., 2022). Consistent with the two-factor theory, the authors concluded that hygiene factors significantly influence turnover, which is consistent with Herzberg's theory (Hultman, 2020).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Baby Boomer generation makes up the largest segment of the workforce. An en masse retirement of the cohort is a problem that affects both the private and public sectors (Gittleman, 2019). The potential workforce epidemic will reach its peak by 2030 with organizations that have created successful ways to transfer knowledge. Organizations must address ways to manage the knowledge and information embedded within the systems and minds of its workforce. Otherwise, the knowledge may be lost or become difficult to replace. Also, the practices of advanced technology allow the leveraging of existing knowledge to create new processes, technology, or business information (Orvitz, 2018).

The need for succession planning is not unique to modern business (Terry et

al., 2021). In 1969, NASA sent Neil Armstrong to become the first man to land on the moon. Less than 20 years later, the same department leaders admitted returning to the moon would be difficult because the current engineers did not have the skills needed to perform the task. The difference between returning to the moon in the 21st century is that the loss of knowledge and talent is affecting both private and public business sections on an unprecedented scale (Carruth & Carruth, 2013). As Baby Boomers retire or partially retire, large voids in talent and knowledge become evident, and succession plans are key to continual prosperity (Hultman, 2020).

As a company attempts to retain its older workforce, it needs to select adept successors and develop plans that will allow these new workers to learn how to perform the critical tasks before a predecessor leaves the workplace (Bachus et al., 2021). Before the older knowledge base leaves, the organization should create transitions or knowledge transfer processes to facilitate the allocation and preservation of as many intellectual assets as possible. Many organizations prefer an experienced workforce that trains and educates the members of a younger workforce (Axelrad et al., 2022). Mentoring creates a bond between the two generations so that an experienced worker is willing to assist the understudy. Even if an experienced person leaves the workforce, he or she may still assist or mentor the other individual (Tang & Jorge, 2021).

A common mistake made by organizations is the alienation of the older workforce. Organizations should not assume that the interest of the older workforce is for only low responsibility positions (Axelrad et al., 2022). Training and lateral career movements within the organization are excellent ways to retain individual interest and involvement within an organization (Tang & Jorge, 2021). The development of plans that preserve critical information, contact, and processes will provide a competitive advantage for the organization (Dorien et al., 2020).

Modern managers and manufacturing human resource professionals increasingly have to manage generational differences within the workforce. A multitude of different options exists in extending a company's longevity. With the options, the workforce plays a pivotal role (Axelrad et al., 2022). Acquiring employee buy-in forms the beginning of the process, increasing the potential for success. Since the workforce of the 21st century is multigenerational, an organization must consider ways to include all generations in the decision-making process to increase satisfaction and loyalty (Stark & Poppler, 2018).

An organization must create a workspace and culture to meet the expectations of different generations. By facilitating a workspace that includes the generations, the organization increases workforce retention (Stettner & Yudken, 2019). A strong multigenerational workforce increases the flow of knowledge between generations and prevents intellectual asset loss. The company is then better prepared to plan for future changes in management and other key technical positions (Axelrad et al., 2022).

The exchange of information or communication is necessary for business

functions but is also imperative for training and knowledge transfer. Although finance, marketing, production, maintenance, and personnel departments may obtain the direction from objectives or corporate goals, communication is what collects and facilitates continual success (Terry et al., 2021). Communication is vital to business success. Organization members should be effective communicators to be efficient. When an organization, department, or team can communicate effectively, the chance for success increases (Singh et al., 2021).

The preferred method of communication is one of the most apparent communication distinctions between generations. A difficulty might emerge when the preferred method of communication for the sender causes frustration for the receiver (Singh et al., 2021). Members of Generation X and Generation Y exist in a workplace that is more technology-driven than that of senior cohorts (Hultman, 2020). As the evolution of technology continues to increase, it is possible that these differences in communication will become even more prominent (Mullins et al., 2022). Effective managers within an organization should stress nontraditional forms of communication (Tang & Jorge, 2021).

Understanding the different expectations and communication methods of a multigenerational workforce is vital (Hultman, 2020). The authors of the peer-reviewed material cited in The Succession Planning of Aging Workforce section discussed lateral movement and training, the need to include each generation, and comprehensive communication (Gaul, 2022; Wisse et al., 2018). The authors did not address manufacturing human resource professional's perspectives of ways to assist the aging workforce transition out of the workforce (Carruth & Carruth, 2013; Singh et al., 2021). Also, other authors failed to discuss these two groups when determining methods for communication across the new and complex skilled workforce (Dixon, 2022; Grossmann, 2022). The theories of Maslow prove useful insights for managers to find ways to motivate employees and to formulate succession plans (Hultman, 2020).

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Methods

The researchers used qualitative research to focus on the interaction, language, and life experiences of the participants. The topic includes subtle distinctions in behaviors and attitudes perceived by the subjects' lived experiences. In-depth interviews seemed a useful tool to explore the participants' experiences to investigate the viability of remaining with the employer. Interviews have broad support among researchers as an effective tool of data collection in qualitative research (Cheron et al., 2022; Bulus & Dong, 2021). Thelwall & Nevill (2021) stated that the use of qualitative interviews enables a researcher to focus on collecting in-depth data from a relatively small participant sample. The conversational and flexible nature of face-to-face interviews allows a researcher to obtain a better understanding of the person's lived experiences, without imposing predetermined constraints upon the participant's responses (Bulus & Dong, 2021).

Cross-referencing this information with the strategies of manufacturing human resource professionals will improve existing processes or foster the creation of new policies.

Other researchers who explored acquisition and retention utilized a qualitative process (Cohen et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022; Lyu et al., 2022; Mullins et al., 2022; Rebmann & Foerst, 2022). Lyu et al. (2022) built on previous qualitative studies to explore the effects of recruitment and retention. In another qualitative study, Leung et al. (2022) evaluated employee turnover and career plans for female physicians. The method was superior to other methods because it allowed for idea generation and development (Cohen et al., 2022). The data collection process of interviewing management and staff was similar to the method for this study. In the study of multigenerational managers and the effect on retaining a younger workforce, Mullins et al. (2022) concluded that a qualitative approach was preferred when exploring nuances or issues of interest to the problem at hand during the global pandemic. If a manufacturing human resource manager does not recognize and prevent these potential issues, then workforce turnover will increase.

The interview process began with companies previously identified as the largest manufacturers in the area. All interviews were with HR professionals in those selected organizations. Transcription and coding occurred daily to ensure the best results. Data were synthesized for analysis after collection and coding. The synthesis provided a summary of the conclusion of the research process. Reviewing and checking each section increased validity to ensure the integrity of the study.

The following questions were synthesized from the research, which represents a portion of the semistructured list of interview and focus group questions:

- What processes do you use to motivate your skilled employees?
- What processes do you use to retain skilled employees?
- What strategies do you use to retain skilled employees?
- What process and strategy are the most effective in retaining skilled employees?

The answers to these four questions helped fill the gaps in the literature regarding offsetting effects of the aging workforce. The information also provided insight for manufacturing human resource professionals in skilled workforce acquisition and retention. Manufacturing human resource professionals who understand and prepare for these events will have an advantage over other organizations.

To address the influence of hygiene factors on employee turnover, business leaders need to ask the following questions:

- What processes do you use to hire skilled employees?
- What strategies do you use to hire skilled employees?
- What process and strategy are the most effective in retaining skilled employees?

These represent some of the possible questions in addressing the gaps in the literature regarding retention. Although these questions may not provide the answers needed, the process may allow decision makers to use better business practices to strengthen the organization. Also, these questions may lead to other questions, which address the phenomenon of employee retention.

Manufacturing human resource professionals also need to understand the answers to the following questions:

- What processes do you use for succession planning?
- What strategies do you use for succession planning?
- What process and strategy are the most effective in succession planning?

Retention and succession planning often refer to the larger knowledge management strategy within an organization (Tyson, 2022). It is necessary to identify key individuals with workplace knowledge and skills before the individuals leave. Once identified, the key individual should transfer the skills and knowledge to newer cohorts. Effective plans need to include the three elements discussed: the aging workforce, current best practices of workforce retention, and succession planning. Otherwise, organizations may risk the loss of key individuals (Reitz, 2022).

3.2. Participants

The eligibility criteria for participants were individuals who are manufacturing human resource professionals working in rural Giles County organizations that require skilled employees. Also, a focus group was formed consisting of all the previously interviewed Giles County manufacturing human resource professionals from three different organizations. The strategy used to gain access to participants was active participation in the Giles County human resource professional luncheons. The luncheons allow local human resource professionals to exchange current issues and ideas. The researchers had existing professional relationships and contact information for human resource managers or general managers whose organizations met the requirements. To facilitate the interviews and create a working relationship with the participants, the human resource professionals were contacted directly to request their involvement in the study. Once granted permission, all necessary documentation was disseminated. An exact process for determining an acceptable sample size in qualitative research does not exist (Hilgard, 2021; Lyu et al., 2022). In this multiple-case design, the unit of study was manufacturing organizations. Lakens (2022) stated that to assess a phenomenon that is suitable or requires a high degree of certainty; a study should have a minimum of 5 - 6 participants.

The interviews were comprised of six human resource professionals who hire skilled employees for manufacturing organizations within rural Giles County, Tennessee. The focus group, consisting of the individual participants, provided perspectives regarding the findings. Purposeful sampling is appropriate for qualitative research for the identification and selection of implementation research

(Lakens, 2022). Additionally, purposeful sampling is acceptable for workforce retention studies (Leung et al., 2022). Using purposeful sampling, the researchers approached the largest employers of skilled employees within the area assuming that the largest employers would have the largest need for an adequate workforce in the face of an aging workforce. A multiple approach to a study, where the researcher wishes to exhibit a high level of certainty, should be at least six cases (Lakens, 2022).

The interviews and focus group took place in a setting void of loud noises or other distractions and were comfortable for the participant. Both processes involved the same ten standardized, open-ended questions previously listed. Before starting the interview or focus group, participants signed a document verifying consent to participate in the study. Confidentiality was affirmed to the contributors by the researchers. If a participant wished to meet at an employer's office, then the interview process took place there. Otherwise, the local economic development office agreed to allow meetings at its location. The participants contributed to the study with free will and accord.

Rural Giles County and its surrounding Tennessee counties have multiple industries that rely heavily on skilled employees. Therefore, several other organizations within the county could take the place of the original organizations selected. If no other organizations exist within these counties, then geographical boundaries could expand. Also, the reduction of the sample size was an option (Lakens, 2022). Although it might feel more natural and comfortable to conduct the interview and focus group process without a script, the use of systematic processes for data collection improves the integrity of the collected data (Lyu et al., 2022).

3.3. Theoretical Framework

The hierarchy of needs and two-factor theories served as the theoretical lens through which to view this study. Maslow (1943) introduced the hierarchy of needs theory. The aspiration to achieve something is the motivation to meet the desired need and is the distinguishing feature between the fulfillment and deficiency of needs (Maslow, 1943). Herzberg, in his two-factor theory, discussed job retention and how independent factors within the workplace cause satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959). According to Herzberg, motivators are positive factors and hygiene are negative factors.

Among the variety of theories embraced by American manufacturing human resource professionals, those of Herzberg et al. (1959) and Maslow (1943) are predominant. Maslow's theory was the foundation of this study because his theory is seminal to retention and acquisition theories (Hultman, 2020).

A combination of Maslow's and Herzberg's theories as the theoretical framework for this study enabled exploration of: 1) what types of need fulfillment human resource professionals in manufacturing have identified that motivate employees to join and stay with a company; 2) what factors enhance or diminish

employee job satisfaction; and 3) what strategies and processes human resource professionals have developed and used as a result to acquire and retain skilled employees.

3.4. Data Analysis

Qualitative data in the research was chosen because it enables the researcher to offer complex accounts of how individuals experience the research topic. A researcher using a qualitative design accomplishes this complex analysis by providing information from the human perspective of the issue (Leung et al., 2022). Research indicates that data acquired from the interview and focus group processes are the result of the participants' interpretation of life experiences regarding any phenomenon under study (Lyu et al., 2022). Therefore, this study used both interviews and focus groups.

Denzin (1970) broadened the scholarly concept of triangulation by classifying four different types. Methodological triangulation on multiple methods of gathering data was used in the study. Methodological triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods for gathering data (Denzin, 1970). Data were gathered from both a focus group and interviews to accomplish methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation was selected because it elucidates corresponding aspects of the phenomenon (Aw et al., 2021; Natow, 2020; Valencia, 2022).

A subgroup analysis in research involves evaluating the existence of disparities or differences between the groups. A difference in subgroup effect signifies a disconnect between manufacturing human resource professionals from different organizations. Distributing the raw data into primary themes is necessary (Richardson et al., 2019). One method for identifying themes and patterns involves the use of word-based techniques. Word-based techniques are crucial because language is the primary form of communication. Word repetition is a process that identifies keywords and the frequency of occurrences in the process. Also, computer programs can easily create the word-frequency information from data to identify themes (Basias & Pollalis, 2018). Once key themes became apparent, the keywords found within each theme were compared and contrasted.

Researchers use NVivo to perform a qualitative data analysis to assist in the processing of data (Alam, 2020). The NVivo software facilitates the researcher's management and organization of the data. The software program enabled the identification of trends and frequencies within the dataset for this study. Both interview and focus group responses were sorted by different categories and subcategories using NVivo (QSR International, 2022). Through the categorization and labeling of the collected data, the researcher can identify themes and ascertain the thematic structure of the analysis (Richardson et al., 2019).

Data coding using NVivo 10 facilitated the process of theme development. Once the themes became apparent, the participant responses were analyzed, compared, and contrasted by question. Recurring themes were compared after

analyzing all of the questions individually. Maslow's and Herzberg's theories were employed to cross reference the reoccurring themes to the theoretical framework.

4. Results and Discussion

The research question used to guide this study was the following: What are the strategies and processes that manufacturing human resource professionals use to acquire and retain skilled employees? Two primary themes answered the research question in the following section. All presented participant responses are from semi structured interviews.

4.1. Theme 1: Company Culture

Creating a solid company culture to retain employees was a method all three companies employed. The participants spoke about the culture of their companies in significant detail. All six of the participants spoke about this theme. Fourteen codes were developed with 33 responses given during the data analysis. Participant 1 spoke about the importance of onboarding new hires and indicated that it was the new employees' first formal introduction to the company. Having an onboarding process enabled Participant 1 to create a logical flow that allowed the human resource department to follow-up in a consistent manner with new hires. The hiring managers were able to receive feedback during the beginning, middle, and end portion of the onboarding process. They could make changes in real time based on the feedback they received from the new hires.

Four of the six participants spoke about the importance of receiving direct feedback from the employees. The participants mentioned several surveys conducted on a regular basis. One of the companies used a survey to assess salary levels and employee engagement. Manufacturing human resource professionals used the salary survey to assess salaries on the local, state, and national level. The company's manufacturing human resource personnel wanted to ensure that they were paying competitive wages to retain skilled labor. The company upper management administered this anonymous survey to find what levels of engagement were present in the company. The information gathered helped to identify areas of dissatisfaction and disengagement within the company. The companies took the information gathered through using the survey to improve company culture and increase employee engagement.

The participants in the survey spoke about the significance of having a positive company atmosphere. Participant 6 stated that it was important that, "people enjoy what they do. Otherwise, they don't do it for very long." Participant 6 believed one way to increase employee retention was to make sure that people enjoyed going to work. Participant 2 supported this statement and remarked, "So for me, that's key. A happy worker is going to stay here." Participant 2 understood the importance of retaining skilled employees and believed enjoyment of their job was key to their satisfaction.

To motivate employees, as per their company culture, three of the six participants spoke about the necessity of constant communication. Participant 4 found that sharing information consistently enabled employees to feel as if they understood what was happening in the company. This sense of inclusion increased employee dedication and buy-in. Participant 5 also spoke about the importance of involving employees and having them feel a sense of empowerment. Participant 5 spoke about the company and said, "making them [employees] feel like they are part of the team and a family, which means keeping them involved with communications, such as the new plant building, and how it's coming along." Participant 5 believed that the ability to share pertinent information would increase employee engagement, which in turn, would lead to higher levels of retention.

Participants 1 and 2 also spoke about the use of communication in building a corporate culture. Their company had recently switched from using bulletin boards for company announcements and information to the use of flat-screened television monitors. Participants elaborated on the use of the monitors and stated: Some of the information shared on the board included the notice of company events, meetings, anniversaries, and birthdays. The participant's companies also distributed information shared on the TV monitors included activities, meetings, promotions, contests, and training classes. Having monitors placed in selected areas throughout the building enabled the management team to ensure that all employees were able to have access to the information.

The television bulletin boards were also a means of public employee recognition for different achievements. Some examples included graduation from school or training programs, information on goal achievement, and recognition of departments as well as individuals. By focusing on the positives, and reinforcing good work, Participant 2 believed retention of good employees would increase.

Participant 6 spoke about a companywide incentive program. Participant 6 described the program, stating that the upper management created the program so that any employee could offer a suggestion that could lead to cost savings or ideas for improvement. Participant 6 thought the potential for process improvement and supporting company culture was worth the small monetary investment.

Another aspect of corporate culture described by the participants was opportunities to serve on different teams or projects. Employees were encouraged to become involved to build team cohesion across departments and sections. Three of the six participants spoke about different teams available for employees.

As many of the positions within the company require employees to work independently, participants welcomed the ability to interact with peers. Participant 6 felt that by building a sense of cohesion, employee retention increased.

The most important factor identified by the participants was aiding in creating the company culture through the many events held by the companies. Par-

ticipant 6 believed that by creating a sense of family employees felt valued and that being valued is a way to display the company values, which included respect, teamwork, innovation, and communication. Participant 2 spoke about the fact that the company was a family organization. Many people worked with siblings or cousins; the group employed was very "close-knit." This feeling of connection helped increase employee satisfaction and retention levels.

Participant 4 spoke at length about many of the different events planned and offered to employees. Some of the events included a Santa Claus for children, company picnics, and other events throughout the year. The company managed to sponsor at least one family-style event every month. Also, during the Christmas season, the company provided each employee "an actual 18-gallon plastic tote, and then it's a cooler tote of food."

Another way that the management team showed appreciation for these skilled employees was during the heat of the summer months. By creating a distinct family atmosphere as a part of their corporate culture, each of the companies was able to gain employee loyalty and commitment, with a sense of being part of a family, which led to long-term employee retention. Participant 6 reported that every year each employee in received hand-signed birthday cards. Also, during various activities, there are drawings for money and gift cards. The company's local manufacturing human resource personnel planned various outings for employees where they could invite a guest with the company picking up the cost. Overall, the company offered many activities and gifts to let employees know that they were valued and that the company cared and was involved in their lives. This sense of family and closeness engendered employee loyalty with individuals working for the corporations for many years.

No variation from the individual interviews was realized in the analysis of the focus group responses. All responses from the focus group confirmed what the participants stated individually. Also, the information was triangulated with the individual responses from the interviews and focus group about the importance of company culture in acquiring and retaining skilled employees.

The body of literature and effective business practices supports the cultural theme and how it is important to skilled workforce acquisition and retention. An organization that creates a family-oriented and flexible culture has an increased opportunity for acquiring talent from organizations that do not have such a culture (Guzeller & Celiker, 2020; Peretz et al., 2022). Also, Therady (2022) conducted a phenomenological study on leading a multigenerational workforce and concluded professional organizations that create a proactive and beneficial culture similar to that of a family should experience a more positive corporate culture. By understanding and acknowledging the differences and similarities between the two genders, employers should promote a better organizational relationship and loyalty, like a family (Peretz et al., 2022).

Herzberg's two-factor theory has two groups known as hygiene and motivation (Herzberg et al., 1959). A hygiene factor includes company culture (Hult-

man, 2020). Maslow (1943) suggests that all individuals have a need for a firmly bashed high evaluation of their own and others' esteem. Snell & Morris (2019) identifies the importance for managers to evaluate their workforce to determine their current level of needs. Having a strong connection between an employee and an organization could explain why culture plays a role in the skilled labor acquisition and retention. Therefore, the theoretical framework of this study supported this theme.

4.2. Theme 2: Succession

The theme of succession addressed one of the main issues faced by the companies who participated in this study. The companies had an aging workforce approaching retirement. It was essential to train younger employees and gather the information held by employees on the verge of retirement. During the individual interviews, all six of the participants identified succession as a central concern. Five codes with 26 individual data units formed to create this theme.

One of the main issues faced by all of the participants in this study was the aging of their workforce. The companies were all in the midst of succession planning, as a large number of their current employees were approaching retirement. With the difficulties faced in locating younger, qualified skilled workers, this issue was taking on increasing urgency. Participant 2 spoke about the steps the company was taking to ensure they retained the information possessed by employees who were getting ready to retire. Participant 2 said it was important to "Hav[e] knowledge written down. If you don't have that, you're starting over on a bunch of things." Participant 2 indicated that the company had just completed a yearlong project to update all of the company's manuals, complete with instructions, pictures, and safety concerns. To accomplish this task, the company managers asked employees, "How do you do the job?" Based on the responses, the company updated the manuals.

Participant 3 was also involved in a similar project. By creating updated organization manuals, the participant was able to bank a wealth of knowledge possessed by the employees who had worked in their positions for many years. The manuals made it easier to train new employees and ensure continuity. Participant 3 spoke about how the company was planning to have a skilled workforce in place as older workers retired. At this point, the company did not have a formal program in place to ensure a smooth transition. However, they were aware of the upcoming changes and had begun a discussion about what steps they needed to implement to ensure knowledge retention. In many instances, they were operating on a case-by-case basis. An earlier incident reinforced the importance of planning for these changes. The employees were fortunate that they had someone who could train them to take the available position. Participant 3 spoke more about succession planning. This issue was important, and his company was in the early stages of assessing the situation to make some informed decisions.

Participant 3 said that the most important facet of succession planning was to:

Make sure that your senior leadership understands succession planning and supports and participates in a regular conversation or planning session. Maybe once a year, we have an official succession planning meeting. But it's real important for the senior leadership to be asking the questions about succession planning, and asking the question to his management team, "Are you prepared? What is your plan?" I think that that's the key. Someone has to drive this and remind the organization that succession planning is critical activity. Otherwise, everyone's going to be busy with the day-to-day routines and activities.

As Participant 3 noted, it was easy to be caught up in day-to-day activates and not see the long-term picture. Succession planning is an essential step for any organization no matter what the size to assure smooth transitions.

On a personal level, Participant 4 prepared in case something happened. Participant 4 understood the value of documenting day-to-day responsibilities so that a person could step in at a moment's notice if necessary.

Participant 1 said that managers were aware of the importance of planning and indicated that company managers were constantly assessing this issue and were focusing on ensuring that a backup existed for all positions.

Participant 3 spoke about the formal process embedded at their workplace for succession planning. Although planning for salaried workers existed, less planning existed when it came to addressing the skilled labor force. Senior management was aware of the need for succession planning. Senior management and the manufacturing human resource professionals had not arrived at a conclusion or standard direction to take in dealing with the issue.

Participant 5's company clearly understood that with the impending retirement of many skilled workers, it was essential to have a plan to address the issue and to ensure that a backup was in place for each position.

The participants did not note any variation during the focus group. A review of the individual responses indicated that the participants in the focus group did not provide any novel information. Their focus group responses confirmed what the participants had stated individually. Because of this level of triangulation, the trustworthiness of the information gathered and analyzed for this study was accurate.

Succession in the workplace is a process of conveying information in multiple forms to unite all members' activities when members leave (Stark & Poppler, 2018). Magasi (2021), as well as Stettner and Yudken (2018), found that succession planning and manuals from the organization were important to all generations in the workforce. Succession is a complex process that requires communication and willing participation (Siambi, 2022).

Succession planning is a necessary part of business. Succession planning is not only useful with leadership changes but can be useful before any real need exists to implement such changes. The process should be continually changing and require both written and unwritten communication on all levels of an organiza-

tion (Siambi, 2022; Snell & Morris, 2019).

The topic of succession in this study is the same subject matter represented as esteem and belonging in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Also, the same subjects are a motivating factor in Herzberg's two-factor theory. An organization's use of succession also engages employees and could be a strategy or procession of workforce acquisition and retention, which is in alignment with the findings of Kern (2021).

5. Conclusion

Manufacturing organizations will continue to have a need for skilled employees. As the workforce ages and skill gaps increase, any organization that requires skilled labor will have an increasingly difficult time maintaining its workforce, and this challenge is especially true for rural areas. The themes discovered in the study were company culture and succession. The two emerging themes provide a foundation for organizations to create processes and strategies for workforce acquisition and retention.

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly accelerated the need for traditional skilled labor and that new skills are needed. The rapid rise of remote work has placed unique demands on those employees who must remain at the physical location, while also supporting those no longer onsite. Therefore, many organizations are faced with how to reduce the need for skilled labor before it's too late. If action is not taken within the next decade, the United States should expect to experience a deficit in its workforce.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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