

Case Study: Recruitment and well-being in early years childcare: Can HRM practices address the staffing crisis faced by an underfunded sector in which low pay has been normalised? (UK, 2019)

Abstract

Yorkshire Childcare, a family-run private nursery chain, is operating in the context of a UK staffing crisis for nurseries. This case identifies the key HRM challenges. It shows that employee attraction can be enhanced by providing more realistic information on website job boards, e.g. YouTube videos and testimonials. Opportunities for student placements should be promoted using multiple social media to support the search engine optimisation activities that are outsourced. The rise in mental health difficulties, resulting in increased employee absence, indicates that increasing employee awareness of the mental health issues is an HR priority to enhance employee well-being, e.g. through peer support and to reduce pressure on the owner manager.

Introduction

Yorkshire Childcare (not their real name) is a family-run private nursery chain founded in 2004. The company runs four nurseries across the West Yorkshire region and employs 127 full-time-equivalent staff. The two owner directors have career backgrounds in corporate Finance and HR. One of the nurseries is located in a large city and serves as the company head office where the owner directors are based. It has a workforce of 43 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff. The other three nurseries (with teams ranging from 15 to 36 FTE staff) are located in smaller neighbouring towns within the region and are visited on a regular basis by the owner directors. Each nursery team comprise a nursery manager, deputy manager, team leaders, nursery nurse practitioners, cooks and cleaning staff. Day-to-day childcare activities are developed, delivered and managed by the highly-trained staff teams.

Purpose

The 'HRM in regional SMEs' questionnaire was completed by the researcher during a meeting with one of the owner directors of the company in March 2019. Using data gathered via the questionnaire and subsequent email correspondence, the case study aims to describe and analyse human resource management (HRM) practices adopted by the company. It will also identify the key HRM challenges they face within the wider context of the early years childcare sector and will recommend solutions where possible.

Sector challenges and their applicability to Yorkshire Childcare

The National Day Nurseries Association's (NDNA) recent workforce survey (of 522 providers in England) describes a "staffing crisis in our nurseries" as a result of a downward trend in workforce qualifications and a lack of skilled staff (NDNA, 2018, p. 3). Practitioners considering leaving their jobs cited a lack of professional recognition, pay not being commensurate with

their level of responsibility and increasing pressures from government policy among their reasons (NDNA, 2018). The survey highlights concern, among many providers, regarding the impact of the current staffing crisis on their ability to deliver the funded childcare promise.

The funded childcare promise describes the government's policy, introduced on 1st September 2017, that entitles most working families in England to 30 hours free childcare or early education during term-time (38 weeks per year) for three- and four-year-olds. The government pays a national average of £4.98 per hour for places to local authorities, of which a proportion is passed on to providers (BBC, 2018). However, the proportion of funding received by providers differs across the country.

The financial landscape

A 2018 survey by the Pre-school Learning Alliance of 1,662 providers revealed that two-thirds of them felt funding from government does not cover the full hourly cost of delivering the places (BBC, 2018). This view was echoed by Yorkshire Childcare in relation to their own provision. Many providers are thus forced to increase charges for other services (such as meals or trips) or increase fees for non-government funded hours to make up the shortfall. In the case of Yorkshire Childcare, they require all children to eat meals prepared on site (as opposed to their own packed lunches), which parents are charged a fee for when supplied as part of the 30 hours offer.

In the case of Yorkshire Childcare, parents are charged a fee for meals when supplied as part of the 30 hours offer, which helps towards their funding shortfall. It must be noted, however, that the company's policy of no packed lunches is, first and foremost, in place to mitigate the risk of cross-contamination and allergic reactions to maintain the health and wellbeing of everybody on site. The risk is heightened by the fact that many of the children and parents have limited English language skills (Yorkshire Childcare looks after children from over 25 different countries with a wide variety of cultural backgrounds). The policy also affords the nurseries greater control over the variety and healthiness of the children's diet (in line with government guidelines on the '5 a day' healthy eating policy) and can be used as an education tool in itself.

The shortfall between government funding rates and the cost to nurseries of providing childcare can be significant, for example, in a different region (Suffolk) the funding rate is £3.87 per child per hour, compared to the £5.20 per child per hour it costs to deliver a place (NDNA cited in BBC, 2018). Another provider that the researcher spoke to in June 2019 - based in Sevenoaks, Kent (currently with 8 staff including the owners) - said that they receive just over £4 per hour per child but estimate the true cost to be closer to £6 - £7. They described being fortunate to operate in an affluent area where most parents are in a position to pay an optional additional fee.

Research by Ceeda (2018a) found that more than two fifths (44%) of nurseries, pre-schools and childminders in England received less funding, in real-terms, than they did five years ago. Their analysis of official DfE figures shows that after adjusting average funding rates for

inflation, 60 local councils in England paid childcare providers less per hour for funded three- and four-year-old places in 2017/18 than in 2013/14. Among these was Bradford Council, in West Yorkshire, who paid providers 14% less - a rate of £4.93 in 2017/18 compared with £5.71 in 2013/14 (Ceeda, 2018a).

Sector commentators report that as a result of funding rates being set and fixed in 2015, they have not kept pace with rising business costs such as business rates, pensions and the annual increases to the National Minimum and National Living Wage (Early Years Alliance, 2019). This has forced some providers to close down altogether. Anecdotal evidence from Yorkshire Childcare suggests that this is indeed the case in the West Yorkshire region.

“We have seen six of our competitor sites close during the past six months. We think people with smaller settings, mainly rented properties, of say 50 places or less are leaving the industry as and when their leases expire.” (Owner director, 2019)

Yorkshire Childcare reported that it has suffered real business rate increases in the region of 100% at three out of four of their settings. This has occurred as a result of a recent revaluation of business rates (effective from April 2018), which they believe has clearly targeted childcare providers in England. In Scotland however, children’s nurseries have been exempted from paying business rates since April 2018, and more recently in April 2019, business rates were abolished for nurseries in Wales. In England, only one local authority, Harrogate Borough Council (in North Yorkshire), offers rate relief of 50% to nurseries (Morton, 2019).

The financial pressures experienced by early years childcare providers mean that many cannot afford to pay nursery nurse practitioners above National Minimum Wage. Research by Ceeda (2018b) estimated an overall shortfall of over half a billion pounds in 2018 across the PVI (private, voluntary and independent) sector. As a result, pay levels across the early years childcare sector remain low. This is clearly a source of frustration to Yorkshire Childcare, who recognise low pay as one of the factors adversely affecting the recruitment and retention of their staff and would like to reward them with higher salaries if they could. Yorkshire Childcare pay minimum wage except at the nursery based in the city (due to wage inflation).

The average annual salary for a nursery worker is estimated to be between £14,000 and £24,000, dependent on experience, for a 38 - 40-hour week (National Careers Service, 2019). At the discretion of the owner directors, exceptional performance among Yorkshire Childcare’s managers is rewarded with small bonuses, but this is by no means a regular or guaranteed reward as it depends on the budget available at the end of the year. The owner directors have emphasised that they “consider it important to not incentivise management to do the wrong thing”. For example, they do not want to encourage managers to take on more children than they are allowed, as prescribed by the regulatory body, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills).

On the question of whether the outflow of potential new employees from the region to larger cities is an important challenge facing the company, Yorkshire Childcare suggested that their city-based nursery presents a challenge due to the area’s buoyant economy. Although, the

company believe that exiting staff are choosing to leave the profession altogether, as opposed to leaving their company to join a competitor. The owner director suggested that exiting employees with an aptitude as educators and an ambition to progress, often opt to train as teachers in order to achieve higher salaries. For those that do not suit childcare or do not wish to gain higher qualifications, employers such as call centres provide a more attractive salary. Yorkshire Childcare reported that one of their valued male practitioners (a rarity in a largely female-dominated profession) would soon be leaving them to join the armed forces.

Practitioner qualifications

In September 2018 the UK Government introduced the Early Years Practitioner (Level 2) qualification. This followed the introduction of Early Years Teachers (graduate/Level 6) and Early Years Educators (Level 3) in 2013 and 2014 respectively (Department for Education, 2018). The National Careers Service (2019) suggest that entry requirements for a Level 2 childcare qualification course are usually 2 or more GCSEs at grades 9 to 3 (A* to D), and 4 or 5 GCSEs at grades 9 to 4 (A* to C) for a Level 3 course.

In July 2018, following a 12-week consultation, the Department for Education (DfE) published the final qualification criteria, which sets out the minimum knowledge, understanding and skills that a Level 2 Early Years Practitioner needs to demonstrate, to be considered qualified to support young children from birth to five years old. The new Level 2 qualification was designed to raise the standard of early years childcare practice and was broadly welcomed by the sector. The NDNA (cited in Gaunt, 2018) said it 'raised the bar' by bringing the Level 2s much closer to the knowledge and experience of Level 3s. The Pre-school Learning Alliance (cited in Gaunt, 2018) also welcomed the steps taken to strengthen the proposed criteria in key areas, such as safeguarding, parental involvement and SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) support.

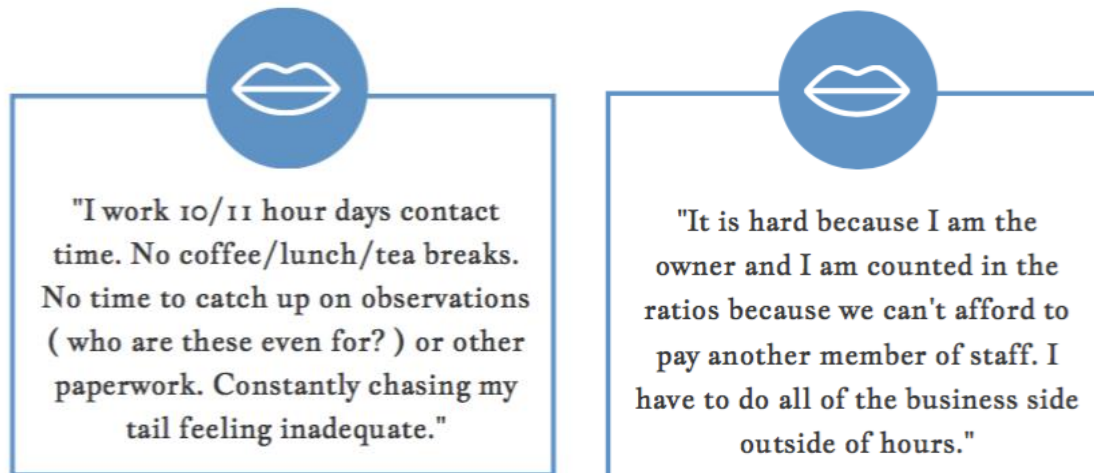
However, Yorkshire Childcare reported a lack of suitably qualified practitioners in the labour market. The NDNA workforce survey (2018) shows a downward trend in workforce qualifications, with Level 3 qualified staff dropping to 66% in 2017/18 - a decrease from 75% in 2016/17 and 83% in 2015/16. The NDNA (2018, p. 3) assert that their research 'confirms that broadening of the GCSE requirements to include functional skills has not made a difference in recruiting level 3 staff. Thirty-five per cent (35%) told us that fewer level 3 staff were available, and 38% said they did not see a positive change as a result. Respondents told us that there are less people wanting to come into the sector with limited or unsuitable applications for vacancies.'

Health and wellbeing

In June 2018 the Pre-school Learning Alliance published a report entitled Minds Matter, which addressed the impact of working in the early years sector on practitioners' mental health and wellbeing. Their survey results 'paint a stark and concerning picture of an early years workforce under significant pressure, with a substantial majority (74%) of respondents

describing themselves having been stressed as a result of their jobs 'quite' or 'very often' over the past month' (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2018, p. 6).

The report suggests that factors contributing to this stress are paperwork and administration, financial pressures, pay, and work-life balance. Many of these factors were of particular concern to owners and managers who report needing to regularly work out of hours (in one case in excess of 60 hours per week plus weekends) to keep up with paperwork.



Source: Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2018, p. 9

The impact of these stress factors is a decrease in practitioners' mental and physical health. The survey found that 65% of respondents said that stress or mental health difficulties relating to work have had an impact on their personal relationships and 45% said they had impacted on their work performance. Twenty-three (23%) reported having taken time off work over the past year as a result of work-related stress, anxiety, panic attacks and depression. Some respondents also cited increased susceptibility to physical illness such as migraines, palpitations, high blood pressure, psoriasis and, in a minority of cases, heart attacks and strokes.

This picture is somewhat reflected in feedback from Yorkshire Childcare, who report an increase in support needed for staff who are "fragile on the back of a severe staff shortage".

"I have to work more of less every day on issues to do with mental health, relationships at home, poor financial planning and a long list of things to try and keep our more vulnerable staff positive." (Owner director, 2019)

It is interesting to note that Yorkshire Childcare managers have all recently completed training on mental health awareness. In their quarterly supervision meetings with individual staff members, managers have now introduced questions, which encourage open discussion around wellbeing and mental health. Support and advice are then provided on an ongoing basis.

The childcare provider based in Sevenoaks (previously referred to on page 3 under the financial landscape) reported an increase in awareness of mental health and wellbeing among

providers within their local authority area (Kent County Council), leading them to recently develop a staff wellbeing policy. They feel that the small size of their workforce and close working team encourages an open environment in which problems are shared and colleagues support one another.

Just over half (52%) of respondents reported that they had spoken to someone at work about stress or mental health, most commonly their line manager (41%) or a colleague (33%). Of those, 62% felt that they had received adequate support in the form of time off for medical appointments, being offered counselling, and the sharing of ideas between colleagues to reduce workload and pressure (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2018).

Barriers to speaking out or to receiving support included a perception that the difficulties they were experiencing was not severe enough, or that nothing could be achieved by confiding in colleagues as they were in the same position. Others also expressed concerns that speaking out might bring into question, in the minds of others, their ability to do their job (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2018).

The long-term impact of not addressing the challenges facing the sector, and the subsequent mental health and wellbeing difficulties it exacerbates, could be an increase in the number of people leaving the profession. Indeed, the Pre-school Learning Alliance's survey (2018) found that 25% of respondents were considering leaving the sector and 5% already had or were about to.

Yorkshire Childcare HRM practices and key challenges

Recruitment and selection practices

Vacancies are advertised via the job board on the company website, on Indeed (a free online job board) and via word of mouth, for example, employee referral. The company also take Childhood Studies degree students on placement, so vacancies are promoted via educational institutions. The company reported that they have never used employment agencies due to cost and also because agency staff do not provide the necessary consistency of care, fundamental to child development.

Research on SMEs indicates that informal recruitment practices such as the use of personal networks can be effective in certain contexts (Carroll et al, 1999; Marchington et al, 2003; Timming, 2011), owing to the need to ensure good person-organisation fit. However, limitations of this approach are acknowledged, such as the finite nature of networks (Kotey & Slade, 2005), reliance on a single network limiting diversity and the range of skills available, as well as the risk of bias and unfair treatment of applicants (Wapshott & Mallett, 2016).

Although personal networks are one of the methods used by the company as a means of recruiting new staff, adherence to strict safeguarding guidelines overseen and inspected by the local authority and Ofsted, ensure a level of formality to recruitment procedures.

Yorkshire Childcare's job adverts include a job summary that details the role location, hours, contract type, responsibilities and duties, qualifications and skills, and the benefits of working for the company. Benefits focus on intrinsic rewards (training and development, positive working environment and professional team), as well financial rewards such as the provision of a uniform, free car parking, company pension and discounted childcare.

Applicants submit a CV and covering letter via the company website and an application form is completed at interview stage. Panel interviews, alongside observation of practice within the setting, are used to select candidates. For managers, interviews are conducted by the owner directors and another manager (where applicable). Interviews for non-management roles are conducted by the nursery manager and the deputy manager or team leader. New recruits undergo a thorough vetting process including previous employment reference checks, together with a police record check through the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). New staff are recruited on a temporary contract, which is then made permanent once a probation period has been passed.

Key challenges

The HRM challenges faced by SMEs that Yorkshire Childcare deem very important to them are:

- Key employees leaving
- Lack of new employees (attracting the right candidate to a vacant position)
- Greater employee demands (demand for pay increase, benefits, working environment, etc.)
- Inability to offer market competitive wages (inability to compete with larger companies)
- Increase in minimum wage

Yorkshire Childcare rated the challenge of building their employer brand of little importance because they have already built and maintain a strong brand through the use of social media. They have accounts with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Google+ and links to these are promoted on the company website. Of those, Facebook is the platform used most frequently by the nurseries to share news about the activities happening within each setting. Twitter has been used to share key achievements, for example awards and Ofsted report findings. However, use of Twitter and Instagram is somewhat out of date, with the last posts in some cases being 1-2 years old. Indeed, the challenge of insufficient use of technologies in recruitment was rated by them as slightly important, along with lack of resources (financial and time) for HRM and attracting graduates to work for them.

Due to one of the owner directors being a qualified HR practitioner with over 20 years' experience, lack of HR expertise within the organisation was not rated as an important challenge for the company. The owner director keeps her HRM knowledge current through CIPD membership and attending networking and training events. Also rated as not as important as some of the other common SME-specific HRM challenges was an ageing economically active population.

The company reported that they have recruited more than 10 young people (under 25-year-olds) in the last three years (i.e. apprentices and younger staff), and they intend to hire more people of this age group over the next three years. As a consequence of budget constraints and cost pressure, if presented with two candidates of equal skill and experience at interview, the company said that they would most likely appoint the younger candidate due to the differential in age-related minimum wage payments. At the time of writing, hourly rates are as follows:

Year	25 and over	21 to 24	18 to 20	Under 18	Apprentice
April 2019	£8.21	£7.70	£6.15	£4.35	£3.90

Source: Gov.uk (2019)

Recommendations

Employee attraction

Although the job board on the company website outlines the key benefits to employees, there is possibly scope to broaden this aspect of the website to provide a more detailed picture of what a prospective employee could expect. This could include testimonials from existing staff (either written or via a link to a video on YouTube), examples of career paths that successful employees have taken within the company, and information about the relationship the company has with universities and colleges for student placements. It could also include signposting to information about careers within the sector, such as those available here: <https://www.cache.org.uk/for-learners/choosing-early-years-as-a-career>

As Facebook is principally used to market services to parents, Twitter and Instagram could be utilised to develop the employer brand further. Content that is focused specifically on the employee experience could be shared as a means of attracting talent. However, it is acknowledged that with already high paperwork demands and limited resources (financial, time and possibly marketing expertise), making changes to the website and managing multiple social media accounts could be out of the company’s current capacity. Yorkshire Childcare pay an IT and marketing company for search engine optimisation and to maintain their website, which is costly but an important tool for attracting new families and maintaining their reputation locally.

Mental health and wellbeing

Fears that openness about mental health difficulties could restrict career prospects highlights the need to increase understanding around mental health in order to promote discussions within early years settings. This could be achieved through ‘myth-buster’ training delivered to the whole workforce by an external specialist (e.g. Thrive Health Consultancy <https://uk.linkedin.com/in/nicola-stenberg-4759a424>).

The rise in mental health difficulties, resulting in increased employee absence, indicates that increasing employee awareness of the support available to them (via a policy, staff handbook or staff meeting) would be a positive step. More formalised peer support mechanisms could be implemented within teams to reduce the pressure on the owner manager, as well as access to information about self-help and external sources of support.

Conclusion

Many of the themes explored in the academic literature in relation to SMEs are echoed in the literature on early years childcare. A recurrent theme is that the poor pay, long hours of work, limited development opportunities and the perceived low status of the work contribute to difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff (Cameron, 1997; Carroll et al, 2008; NDNA, 2018; Rolfe, 2005; Rolfe et al, 2003; Wilkinson, 2002).

In their study on the barriers to the recruitment and retention of managerial staff in the Scottish tourism industry, Martin et al (2006), using a hybrid of Herzberg's dual-factor theory and Maslow's hierarchical theory, found that intrinsic factors (such as image of the industry and development opportunities) were more influential than hygiene factors (such as working conditions). Rolfe et al (2003) point to studies that suggest the intrinsic features of childcare work, e.g. contact with children, generate high levels of satisfaction, but argue that the sector is vulnerable to high turnover due to its perceived low status.

Carroll et al (2008) found that gender segregation and small business characteristics compound recruitment and retention problems experienced by childcare providers. In their now somewhat dated research on recruitment and retention in the childcare sector, Rolfe et al (2003) assert that recruitment in the day nursery sector is limited by the workforce's homogeneity, with the majority of staff being young, female and white.

The possible benefits of encouraging more men into the sector have been explored (e.g. Cameron et al, 2001). However, research has shown that providers have previously expressed scepticism about this idea, due to men being discouraged by the sector's image as 'women's work', the low pay and fear of allegations of child abuse (Rolfe, 2005 & 2006; Rolfe et al, 2003).

Rolfe et al's (2003) research also explored the idea of solving understaffing by widening recruitment to target underrepresented groups such as older workers (50+), workers with disabilities and those from minority ethnic groups. However, at that time, they found that stereotyped views among some providers (for example, that practitioners within some of these groups would not be able to cope with the physical demands of the job) limited the viability of this approach. Attitudes have no doubt moved on in the sixteen years since this research was conducted. However, the early years sector, like many other sectors, arguably still has some way to go to create a workforce that reflects the diversity of the children in its care.

It is clear that as long as initiatives like the 30-hour funded childcare promise are underfunded by government, providers will continue to experience difficulty recruiting and retaining staff who they are unable to pay at a rate commensurate with their knowledge, skill and level of responsibility. This perpetually restricts providers to a much smaller pool of talented individuals that are, for whatever reason, prepared to forgo higher wages in exchange for the recognised intrinsic benefits of educating children at foundation-stage.

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