

Human Resources Management Practices in Enhancing Knowledge Retention in the Registrar's Department at NUST, Zimbabwe

Vol. 8 No. 1

May 2023

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Abstract

Rationale of Study – The study's goal was to determine how the Registrar's Department at the National University of Science and Technology might improve knowledge retention by applying human resources management procedures. (NUST). NUST is losing critical knowledge through retirement, dismissals, resignation, and other attrition methods, affecting efficient and effective business operations at NUST.

Methodology – The study adopted a qualitative research approach and used a case study design, utilizing interpretivism as its paradigm. The data was gathered through face-to-face interviews. Interview subjects were chosen through purposeful sampling. The information collected was examined and presented thematically.

Findings – The findings revealed that the Registrar's Department is operating without a knowledge management policy and knowledge strategies to capture critical knowledge from its employees and, as such, is losing essential knowledge when staff members leave through resignations and deaths, among other reasons. It also emerged that senior-level executives' support does not provide adequate funding to encourage knowledge retention. The study concluded that formalized coaching and mentoring, incentives, succession planning, and a lack of retention methods were all considered obstacles to knowledge transfer and retention within the organization.

Implications – The study contributes to the need for the Human Resources Department at NUST to adopt strategies to retain the knowledge of experts and adopt a knowledge management policy that will guide and enable systematic knowledge management processes.

Originality – This is a unique empirical study in a Zimbabwean university.

Keywords

Explicit knowledge, human resources practices, information and communication technologies, knowledge retention, tacit knowledge

Citation: Ntini, V.C. & Dewah, P. (2023). Human Resources Management Practices in Enhancing Knowledge Retention in the Registrar's Department at NUST, Zimbabwe. *Regional Journal of Information and Knowledge Management*, 8 (1),60-75.



Published by the
**Regional Institute of
Information and Knowledge
Management**

P.O. Box 24358 – 00100 –
Nairobi, Kenya

1 Introduction

Retaining knowledge is essential, and universities are becoming important players. Human Resource (HR) units in various corporate organizations can play a significant role in knowledge retention by using innovative HRM practices that include individual and organizational learning, motivation, talent identification, and management and training, to mention a few (Hadi & Hosseingholizadeh, 2019). Information's importance to an organization's assets and capacity to boost productivity and efficiency makes it so significant. Managers can enhance decision-making processes and service delivery by developing their ability to retain knowledge (Monavvarian et al., 2013). Postolache (2017) asserts that knowledge retention is crucial, especially in universities, since universities have become beacons of knowledge and innovation. In order to recruit, retain, and add value in today's knowledge firms, where value is dependent on the talents and abilities of the workforce, these cutting-edge HRM strategies must be implemented (Shaukat et al., 2015). This study focuses on HR practices that can help lead to good knowledge retention at the NUST registrar's department. The Registrar's office oversees the day-to-day operations and critical administrative tasks in any university, hence this study's significance and prioritization.

Mondy and Martocchio (2012) believe that HRM procedures should be used to manage human resources because they significantly boost an organization's competitive edge. It has become essential to reinvest in the aggregate knowledge of human expertise gained via their skills, experience, and engagement with their environments. The most crucial aspect of HRM is that people and their interpersonal relationships are viewed as resources and utilized as such (Gope et al., 2018). Delong (2004) notes that in addition to technological solutions like databases, expert locators, intranets, groupware, and automation, preserving vital knowledge in the workplace necessitates human solutions like mentoring, succession planning, and career development processes. Chakraborty and Ganguly (2018) believe that while there is still room for improvement in our comprehension of the connection between human resource management practices and knowledge management, the effectiveness of procedures for managing knowledge and uplifting employees within a company are interconnected.

2 Problem Statement

Studies done by researchers at NUST (Dewah & Sibanda, 2022; Sibanda, 2015) indicate that the HR department does not have a Knowledge Manager, and no policy

systematically regulates and governs the management of the University's knowledge as a result was continuously losing corporate and individual knowledge despite all the benefits that come with knowledge retention like increased performance and preservation of organizational skills. Knowledgeable, skilled, and highly competent employees were quitting, retiring, or moving to other departments, losing necessary corporate expertise. The University confirmed that there had been some changes in the organizational structure and strategy regarding employee retention, where employees were allowed to retire early (NUST report, 2018). The Registrar's Department does not have strategies to prevent these losses and, as a result, continues to lose knowledge when staff leaves. While dangers of an aging workforce, a dwindling talent pool, and loss of corporate knowledge are some of the difficulties that an organization is guaranteed to confront in the absence of knowledge retention methods, knowledge loss due to various types of workforce attrition is unavoidable (Dewah, 2012; Alexandra & Ramona, 2019). Sibanda (2015) reveals that while NUST participates in workshops, seminars, and report writing to generate and share knowledge, very little is done to retain that knowledge, such that it primarily resides in employees as tacit knowledge, so when they leave, they leave with it. This is an issue because, in the knowledge age, the HR at the Registrar's Department has to go beyond the administrative roles of the HR department, changing it to reflect a significant role in providing strategic direction regarding knowledge retention within the University. The concern is that if the NUST HR department continues to operate without strategies to harness and preserve knowledge, it will slowly lose its competitive edge.

This study aimed to ascertain the role played by the NUST HR unit in retaining critical knowledge in the Registrar's Departments/units to maintain a competitive edge in service delivery. The study specifically aimed to accomplish the following objectives: identify the NUST policies and practices related to knowledge retention; outline the NUST's knowledge retention technologies; establish if there is a knowledge-sharing culture among Registrar's Department at NUST; find out the extent of the university top management support in retaining critical knowledge in the Registrar's Department; and determine HRM practices that promote knowledge retention among Registrar's Department at NUST.

3 Review of Literature

3.1 Knowledge Retention Policies, tactics, and Procedures

A knowledge retention policy is one of the most crucial tactics that should be applied as a tool for knowledge retention. Written rules establish enforceable legal agreements between parties, the organization, and interested parties. They also serve as institutional foundations for creating, managing, and applying organizational knowledge (Lee & Lee, 2007; Wamundila & Ngulube, 2011). According to Goswami (2020), knowledge management rules establish standards for every employee against which performance can be managed and evaluated. Conversely, universities frequently fail to recognize the value of knowledge as a strategic resource because they lack knowledge management policies and strategies (Maponya, 2004). However, an effective knowledge management policy will allow knowledge retention to be ingrained within the structure and culture of the organization (Agarwal & Marouf, 2014). As a result, colleges must develop knowledge management policies that can aid in managing knowledge since successful organizations must be able to use their knowledge assets, such as individuals, teams, communities, policies, processes, and procedures, and continuously update them. According to Agarwal and Marouf (2014), the organization's knowledge retention processes will not deteriorate over time, even when essential board members, contractors, or workers depart because of defined policies, strategies, and procedures.

3.2 Technologies used in knowledge retention

To support the development, sharing, and transfer of knowledge, various technologies, including email, mailing lists, newsgroups, discussion forums, knowledge weblogs, and knowledge systems, are available (Mutula & Mooko, 2008). According to Dewah and Sibanda (2022), ICT infrastructure enables the quick capture, transfer, sharing, storage, and dissemination of knowledge among employees, aiding in knowledge retention and getting the correct information to the right people at the right time and place. Once tacit knowledge has been abstracted and codified, it can be more easily disseminated throughout the organization (Agarwal & Marouf, 2014). This viewpoint emphasizes the importance of information technology for improving knowledge retention, and organizations should use ICTs.

ICT tools can be used in knowledge retention by providing storage through the codification of knowledge into databases, and that knowledge is made accessible most conveniently (DeLong, 2004; Mutula & Mooko, 2008). ICT tools can convert tacit information to explicit knowledge, which can be better managed and retained than tacit

knowledge, according to DeLong (2004), who claims that this codification stage decreases the risk of knowledge loss and maximizes knowledge sharing, protection and usage. ICTs play a significant role in knowledge management processes for some reasons (Jumba et al., 2020). These tools support knowledge processes and employees by facilitating easy access to organized information and better communication and collaboration among knowledge workers. Technology makes communication routes easier, which helps with information transmission, sharing, and retention (Dewah, 2014).

3.4 HRM practices and critical knowledge retention

Successful companies must promote a positive workplace culture to maintain high employee and knowledge retention (Castro-Casal et al., 2013). It encompasses the entire process of what a company may do to ensure that its most valued employees do not have a reason to quit and that, should they do so, the company does not lose a portion of its corporate expertise. Vital knowledge is the priceless and enduring expertise to provide a sustained competitive advantage that justifies the expense of preserving it and passing it along from employee to employee (Agarwal & Islam, 2014). Maintaining vital expertise at work involves technological and human solutions, including automation, expert locators, career development processes, mentorship, succession planning, and intranets (Acharya & Jena, 2016). Every company has a unique definition of essential knowledge (Agarwal & Islam, 2014), which is one of the main reasons why it is so important. Vital knowledge is frequently difficult to replace through hiring, if not impossible. Retaining that kind of knowledge is essential since it is acquired via actual, in-depth experience within a business (Acharya & Jena, 2016).

Any company should place a high priority on knowledge retention and transfer because it is a process that aims to identify business-critical knowledge and create efficient mechanisms to transfer it, ensuring that the organization retains it and can use it to improve performance and gain an advantage over competitors (Doan et al., 2011). Crew changes, an aging workforce, employee mobility, hand-overs, and asset transfer can impact the caliber and availability of expertise (Acharya & Jena, 2016). To prevent knowledge loss, an organization can map out essential knowledge, competencies, and hazards, design and organize knowledge retention and transfer programs, educate people to carry them out and monitor their effectiveness (Mills & Smith, 2011).

Sana and Waqar (2016) claim that highly qualified subject-matter specialists, engineers, and managers take years of laborious, experience-based knowledge with them when they

leave their firms; much of it is undocumented and irreplaceable. So, the performance and safety of the organization may be jeopardized by a lack of a knowledge retention strategy. According to Mahmood and Nasir (2019), the quality of a company's products and services suffers when a person leaves, as well as productivity, profitability, and corporate memory. The nature of these losses is a crucial management issue. Although the expenses associated with replacing employees can be high, and the specific skills and knowledge people leave the workplace with may take years to replace, the issue of turnover can be solved by a variety of proactive employee retention, workplace policies, and practices that foster dedication and allegiance among employees (Gope et al., 2018).

According to Mahmood and Nasir (2019), an organization's tacit knowledge retention relies heavily on its human resources processes and practices. These practices and processes include things like after-action reviews, training, professional growth, practice groups, mentoring programs, innovative compensation systems, written reports, staffing profiles, career development processes, succession planning, phased retirement programs, and changes to the workplace culture that support staff (Goswami, 2020).

Knowledge transfer methods that combine training include cross-training, work rotation, phased retirements, mentoring, and coaching (Nkomo et al., 2018). Universities can gain a lot by implementing mentoring as a knowledge retention tool. It allows the new generation to learn from experienced employees doing the job for years. Agarwal and Marouf (2014) can improve employee retention by encouraging membership-oriented dedication and behavior. The compensation package should be sufficiently attractive so employees will not look for businesses prepared to provide more attractive compensation packages (Sultana & Goswami, 2020). Thus, compensation and rewards help the organization retain motivated and optimistic employees.

Training is crucial for improving employee productivity since trained people will offer highly-quality knowledge that will comprise a large portion of the organization's knowledge base (Cardon & Stevens, 2004; Mahmood & Nasir, 2019; Sultana & Goswami, 2020). Succession planning constitutes one of the most often used strategies for knowledge retention. Planning for the transfer of information through succession is a proactive step toward empowering new hires and, as a result, preventing knowledge loss for the company (Stovel & Bontis, 2002). With an aging workforce, unanticipated knowledge loss from fatalities and turnover, and guaranteeing the identification of skills

and competencies across the organization, succession planning concentrates on the transmission of knowledge that is required.

Communities of practice are a method for retaining knowledge that involves knowledge transfer between formal and informal groups of employees in an organization (Nickols, 2003). It can be used when there is a deficit of expert knowledge due to retirement or employee mobility, which results in the exodus of young workers with the knowledge that is operationally relevant (DeLong, 2004). Human resource managers can support and facilitate peer-organized CoPs by creating a conducive environment for employees to socialize and network (Jorgensen & Keller, 2008). Al-Khaled (2012) views motivation as another method that can be used to retain and preserve knowledge. Human resource managers should motivate employees by building willingness in employees to work, share and retain knowledge. Employee turnover indicates the loss of expertise and significant role models and lowers morale among those who remain.

4 Theoretical framework

The information retention model developed by Doan et al. (2011) served as the basis for this investigation. The KR-SME model provides a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge retention practices within organizations. The key components, including top management support, the KR strategy, learning culture, HR policies, and ICT tools, are shown in Figure 1.

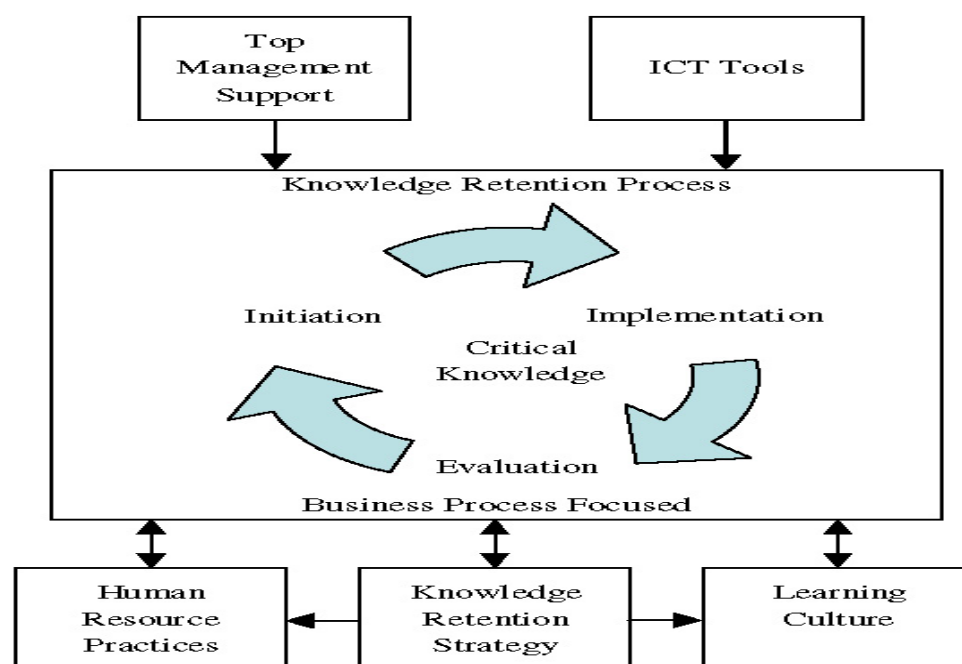


Figure 1 KR-SME model

Top management support refers to the extent to which top managers set an example by engaging in knowledge retention activities, creating all favourable conditions for the process, and making additional resources available when deemed essential. Alignment with company strategy, transparency, viability, and adaptability are the four fundamental pillars of a knowledge retention strategy. The degree to which a knowledge retention plan assists the business strategy is referred to as alignment with the business strategy. Teamwork, collaboration, adaptability, and unity define a learning culture. Staffing, job design, performance rating systems, incentive and pay systems, and training and development are all part of human resource practices. The use of ICT applications to speed up the process of knowledge retention is referred to as "ICT tools." According to the authors, knowledge retention is regarded as the primary source of competitive advantage for all firms in today's business environment and should be addressed seriously.

5 Methodology

In a case study design, the study adopted interpretivism as its paradigm and followed a qualitative research approach because it is interactive (Creswell, 2014) and also in order to understand issues related to knowledge retention within the context of NUST. The target population was the Registrar's Department, which consists of the Registrar, Deputy Registrar non-academic, Deputy Registrar Academic, Deputy Registrar HR, the Senior Assistant Registrars, Academic Affairs (that is, exams, admissions, and student records departments), Personnel, Central Services, Accommodation and Catering Services, Works and Student Affairs. The researchers purposively sampled 15 participants, including the Registrar, Deputy Registrar(s), Senior Assistant Registrars, and the Training and Staff Development Manager, to participate since they possess the most affluent knowledge on human resources practices that can enhance knowledge retention. They hold the critical responsibility of adopting and implementing university policies. In order to conceal their identity, interviewees were coded from A. Interviews were used to gather data required for meeting the study's objectives. The precise study objectives were used for the data analysis, and the results were presented thematically.

6 Findings and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the study's findings.

6.1 Policies for knowledge retention and their necessity

Regarding the existence and necessity of policies to retain knowledge at NUST, Interviewees gave the following responses:

Interviewee D: “The university does not have a knowledge management policy though there is a staff development policy that focuses on developing staff members rather than retaining and managing knowledge.”

Participant A: “It sets the standard for Knowledge Management within an organization as policies define the goals of an organization and provide guidance about how to achieve objectives.”

Participant H: “Policies identify key activities, such as how knowledge will be acquired, shared, used retained and preserved”.

Participant K: “It ensures that everyone knows what is expected of them in terms of Knowledge management and why this is important to the organization.”

Participant L: “It acts as a referral for employees so they can regularly refer back to it when they have to.”

Participant G: “Policies provide guidance, consistency, accountability, efficiency, and clarity on how an organization operates.”

These findings show that employees appreciate the importance of a policy and agree that a policy is necessary for the management of knowledge in the University. However, they are unaware of policies that govern the University's knowledge management. This reinforced the claims made by Nkomo et al. (2018) that human resources can lead to promoting a policy's development and arguing for funding for knowledge management. According to Lee and Lee (2007), a policy will make it possible for knowledge management to become ingrained in the organization's structure and culture. According to Davenport (1999), set policies and procedures ensure that the organization's operations do not stray or worsen over time, even if essential employees leave.

6.1.2 Strategies Used for retaining knowledge, expertise, and Experience of Staff

When questioned about the methods the University employs to help staff retain knowledge, expertise, and experience, interviewees C, A, J, and L noted that the department usually promotes employees with vast experience in a particular field and that, in a way, retains knowledge in the Registrar's section.

Interviewee G: “The department does not have formal strategies to use to retain knowledge and as such knowledge is shared haphazardly when there is need. There is no succession plan in the department”.

Interviewee F: “There are no structures in place to retain knowledge, and employees leave the organization with their knowledge.

Interviewee H: “Due to restructuring some employees leave the department with critical knowledge and the department struggles to fill the gap that they leave”.

Interviewee A: "The department does not have any succession plan."

Interviewee B: "One is not aware of any succession plan."

According to the findings, the department lacks systematic knowledge retention procedures, which could result in losing essential knowledge. The findings are consistent with El-Farr and Hosseingholizadeh’s (2019) observation that an organization that does not have knowledge management strategies is vulnerable to loss of crucial knowledge. The findings indicated that the department had not made any efforts to consider the use of succession planning as part of knowledge retention, yet Ryba (2022) advises that succession planning is another step in a knowledge retention strategy to protect the organization as it involves professional growth, which may take the form of training, mentoring, internships, or a gradual increase in more advanced responsibilities. This lack of planning could be very problematic for the University, with potentially devastating results.

6.2 Available technologies for knowledge retention

Regarding available technologies that facilitate the capture and retention of knowledge at NUST, all interviewees mentioned Navision as the primary system that the University uses. Interviewees G and F explained that though the University uses the system, it has challenges and is not currently stable.

Interviewee D: “The University also uses laptops and desktop computers.”

Interviewee A: "Technology plays a big role as it can be used to store knowledge."

Interviewee B: “It is important because it can be used to share knowledge faster."

Interviewee G: "There is a significant overlap in the relationship between knowledge management and technology, especially information technology."

Interviewee H: "Yes because technology aid knowledge retention in terms of knowledge distribution."

Interviewee C: "Yes knowledge retention is related to knowledge sharing and technology plays a huge role in sharing through platforms like Gmail."

Interviewee D: "Technology is the tool that enables knowledge retention and to complete its different processes and provide its services to the target audience."

Interviewee J: "Knowledge management and technology are dependent on each other."

Interviewee J: "Technology enables knowledge management to gather appropriate data and information from faraway places around the world."

The results are consistent with Dewah and Sibanda's (2022) findings. Implementing knowledge management initiatives has become more straightforward with technical tools since ICTs make it easier to share knowledge and information (Akhu-Zaheya et al., 2012). The findings corroborate Harvey and Mitchell (2012), who explain that organizations should use the enormous volumes of data and information stored on current servers and computers, enabling them to deliver more accurate and knowledgeable results.

6.3 A Culture of sharing and knowledge retention

Interviewees were asked whether the university environment promotes a culture of sharing that, in turn, contributes to knowledge retention. Interviewees responded as follows:

Interviewee L: "Knowledge is shared only when there is need like when the university needs to fix an existing problem."

Interviewee D: "The University promotes knowledge sharing through get-together meetings or regular sectional meetings through platforms like Sisonke."

Interviewee J: "To a certain extent the university promotes knowledge sharing especially if the knowledge is coming from top management."

Interviewee A: "The University does not promote knowledge sharing."

The findings show that formal knowledge sharing still needs to be improved because the University has not created an environment for employees to share knowledge freely. Henschke (2011) explains that employees are likely to share and participate in knowledge retention procedures if the company already has a tradition of sharing, learning, and an appreciation of the importance of knowledge. This corroborates Castro-Casal et al. (2013) that successful organizations must promote a positive work environment to maintain high levels of knowledge and staff retention.

6.4 Top Management and critical knowledge retention

Regarding the top management's roles in retaining critical knowledge in the University, the following emerged:

Interviewee A: "Top management approves or disapproves suggestions made by other employees."

Interviewee L: "Currently nothing."

Interviewee G: "Nothing that I am aware of."

Interviewee H: "Not much."

The findings point to the fact that the University's top management needs to do more in terms of retention of critical knowledge. However, El-Farr and Hosseingholizadeh (2019) argue that the organization's upper ranks motivate its personnel and reward those actions, attitudes, and behaviors necessary for efficient knowledge management.

6.5 Human Resources and Knowledge Retention

Participants were asked how the Human Resources practices such as training, succession planning, induction, and recruitment help retain employees' knowledge within the Registrar's office.

Interviewee H: "Performance appraisal helps management in judging how well employees perform their tasks."

Interview G: "Recruitment helps in obtaining the quality of employees required to satisfy the strategic needs of the organization."

Interviewee C: "Training and career development assist employees in acquiring the knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience needed to perform current or future jobs. The human resource department does a regular assessment of staff performance and qualification so as to allow for promotion and re-deployment

where necessary so that employees are compelled to stay hence their knowledge remains in the department.”

The findings indicate that HRM practices can advance knowledge retention in the University. They are consistent with Svetlik and Stavrou-Costea's (2007) views, which highlight the advantages of integrating HRM and KM, where each strengthens and complements the other to improve organizational efficiency and productivity. Studies by Gloet (2006), Narasimha (2000), and Delong (2004) have revealed some HRM practices such as mentoring and coaching, succession planning, innovative compensation systems, training and professional development, and communities of practice as some the practices that organizations can adopt to enhance knowledge retention.

7 Conclusions

Despite the University's ongoing knowledge loss due to personnel turnover, the investigation concluded that it operates without a knowledge retention plan. According to the study's conclusions, the University has the information technologies needed to satisfy the information and knowledge requirements of its personnel and the organization. Staff members believed that the University's leadership and managerial staff were not doing enough to encourage knowledge sharing. Un institutionalized knowledge transfer methods indicate a significant lack of top management commitment and leadership support. The study concludes that a performance management system, formalized mentoring and training, succession planning, incentives, and retention strategies were all lacking in the organization, which was thought to be a barrier to knowledge retention. The theoretical implications of the KR SMEs model reveal that the NUST HR unit should emphasize the retention of good, qualified employees as they possess critical knowledge that contributes to the efficiency of service delivery at NUST.

8 The implication of the study

The study contributes invaluable literature on HR practices vis avis knowledge retention. This research contributes to the need for HR units in universities to be fashioned so that the practices will enhance knowledge retention to avoid losing knowledge and reinventing the wheel. The university managers may devise policies that enhance knowledge capture and retention.

9 Recommendations

In light of the results, the study recommends that:

1. The HR department at NUST should draft and eventually implement a policy for knowledge retention. The department should adopt strategies and procedures for knowledge retention to avoid losing critical knowledge from its employees.
2. The HR department should consider using technology to capture, share, transfer, retain, and preserve knowledge.
3. The HR unit should plan more seminars/workshops to ensure NUST stays relevant and current and can keep up with the changing world. The HR unit should encourage experienced employees to share their field experiences to pass knowledge to newer staff members.
4. The NUST HR unit encourages top management and leadership to play its role in promoting KM through approving budgets, implementing policies, and championing employees toward the knowledge retention goal.
5. The human resource management department should be actively devising strategies and procedures for knowledge retention, such as succession planning, mentoring, training, and professional development, to solve the problems caused by knowledge loss.
6. Future studies be carried out to establish other determinants of knowledge retention.

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