



Talent Management in Local Government in Vietnam

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To improve government performance and effectiveness, many cities in Vietnam provided generous scholarships for talented students or competent public officials in exchange for their work commitments. However, talents' turnover rate has suggested some talent management (TM, hereafter) issues in this non-western country. Based on adopting Vroom's expectancy theory and different motivation theories, this paper investigates what TM issues discouraged talents to join or remain working in the public sector. The authors conducted an online survey with 75 scholarship recipients and in-depth interviews with 10 scholarship recipients. Results revealed the damaged prestige of human development programs in the public sector and troubles faced by talents at workplaces. The pressure of top-down management on TM was also highlighted. Based on findings, this study suggests several recommendations to improve TM in Vietnamese local government.

Keywords: *Talent Management, Turnover Intentions, Public Sector, Vietnam, Local Government*

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, many human resource (HR, hereafter) development programs have been deployed at both national and local levels, including but not limited to the Project 322 and the Project 165 of the central government¹, the 300 Doctorates and Masters Program² followed by the 500 Doctorates and Masters Program³ of Ho Chi Minh City, and the Promotion of HR Program of Danang city. On the one hand, these programs have substantially improved the public

¹ On sending leaders and managers in the public sector to study abroad.

² For the period 2001-2005

³ For the period 2005-2010

workforce's competency. On the other hand, many scholarship recipients have failed to perform their agreed obligations, which has gained critical attention from the public. For example, the Project 322, with 2,500 billion VND (\$108 million) in total funding, was a sign of the government's assertive ambition in developing a high-quality public workforce. However, this project ended with disputable results. There were 33 non-return scholarship recipients. At the same time, many returners ultimately quit their jobs for the reason that they were unable to utilise their acquired knowledge or advance their careers in the public sector (Vinh Ha, Ngoc Ha, 2012). Turnover was also observed among many participants of the 500 Doctorates and Masters Program of Ho Chi Minh City. By September 2010, of more than 200 participants, 28 people resigned or changed jobs because of poor job-fit and low income (Tieu Ha, 2010).

Danang city has experienced a similar situation despite many efforts to grow a quality HR for the public sector⁴. The 2019 data of the Danang Center for the Promotion of HR Development revealed that about 17.1% of scholarship recipients decided not to join the Danang city government and 11.6% of them left their jobs earlier than the agreed term. Thirty-two scholarship recipients were sued for not performing work commitments after completing their training program (Tan Tai, 2018). According to Bui and Chang (2018), the proportion of talent turnover in the local government of Danang city was worth-concerning. Therefore, this study examines the weaknesses of TM practices in local governments, which have propelled talent turnover intention.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Talent and talent management*

Identifying who is 'talent' clearly and understanding TM deeply lay a vital foundation for any organisation to win 'the war for talents'. However, the ambiguity around 'the definition, scope and overall goals of TM' (Lewis and Heckman, 2006) has resulted from different viewpoints regarding 'the nature, value, and instrumentalities of talent' (Meyers, van Woerkom, Paauwe, & Dries, 2019). The term 'talent' in this study refers to scholarship recipients of local governments in Vietnam. Thus, this term is closer to the exclusive-subject perspective of the literature review on talent. Regarding definition of talent management, this study follows an exclusive approach, which refers to selecting, training, employing, and retaining these scholarship recipients.

⁴ In the government of Danang city, scholarships have been provided in exchange for the commitment of the recipients to work from 5 to 7 years after their graduation. This agreement has been represented in contracts signed with scholarship recipients and their representatives. Under this legally binding commitment, talents or their representatives will have to pay a compensation of 5 times the scholarship amount if talents fail to meet their contractual obligations (Danang People's Committee, 2004).

Most of the existing research about TM has been conducted in western countries (Jhatial, Mangi & Ghumro, 2012). For many developing countries, TM has remained a relatively new topic in public management (Bui & Chang, 2018). This research gap in the literature has called for more studies of TM in these unnoticeable contexts.

2.2. Turnover intention and Motivation

The term 'turnover intention' refers to the likelihood an employee would leave a job within a short time (Ngo-Henha, 2017). According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), 'the best predictor of an individual's behaviour will be a measure of his intention to perform that behaviour'. For organisations, turnover-intention has been a preferable indicator than actual turnover as it reflects management practices better. In contrast, actual turnover can be low just because of high unemployment rates rather than good management practices (Naresh, Chong & Pawan, 2001).

Motivation can be seen as a key factor that determines people's choices, including the tendency to leave. Demotivated employees are usually absent from work and lack effort, for that reason, they hardly move up in their current organisation. A weak connection with the current organisation often leads to a high intention to seek another employer. In contrast, motivated employees tend to get pleasure from their job, work with energy, effort, high engagement, and achieve desired performances. With a good career prospect, a sense of embeddedness with their organisation, and the ability to take more responsibilities at work, people with high motivation were less likely to leave.

While the most common reason for turnover was low salary (Mabaso & Moloji, 2016; Beulen, 2009), there were also many reasons for people to remain working in the public sector. Public sector attractiveness comes from job stability and safety, which normally attracts risk-averse workers (Boudarbat, 2008; Lewis & Frank, 2002). Other reasons included rewards associated with the public sector such as job security, pension systems, lower tension between family and work obligations, and overall quality of life (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008). Interestingly, there was a large preference for public sector jobs in post-Communist and developing countries, compared to Anglo-American and Scandinavian countries (Norris, 2003).

Public Service Motivations has been viewed as the deciding factor for public employment preferences (Ritz et al, 2016; Kim et al., 2013; Carpenter, Doverspike & Miguel, 2012; Christensen & Wright, 2011; Perry & Wise 1990;). This motivation inclined civil servants to connect their performance with the well-being of society and it relied on 'intrinsic rewards over extrinsic rewards' (Kim, 2006). It was related to the sense of contribution to society and contribution to organisational performance (Jacobson, 2011). For this reason, civil servants with strong Public Service Motivation are likely to stay rather than seek a higher salary elsewhere.

2.3. *Expectancy theory*

Vroom's discussion of 'expectancy' seems very compelling in explaining the problem of talent turnover. Accordingly, the withdraw of talents is not solely triggered by a higher salary or position offered to them. It results from a thorough consideration of various factors such as their confidence with the new job, the reward offer, their personal goals, values, and the anticipated satisfaction towards those rewards. The effectiveness of Expectancy theory in predicting employee turnover intention has been confirmed by many empirical studies (Chiang & Jang, 2008; Daly & Dee, 2006).

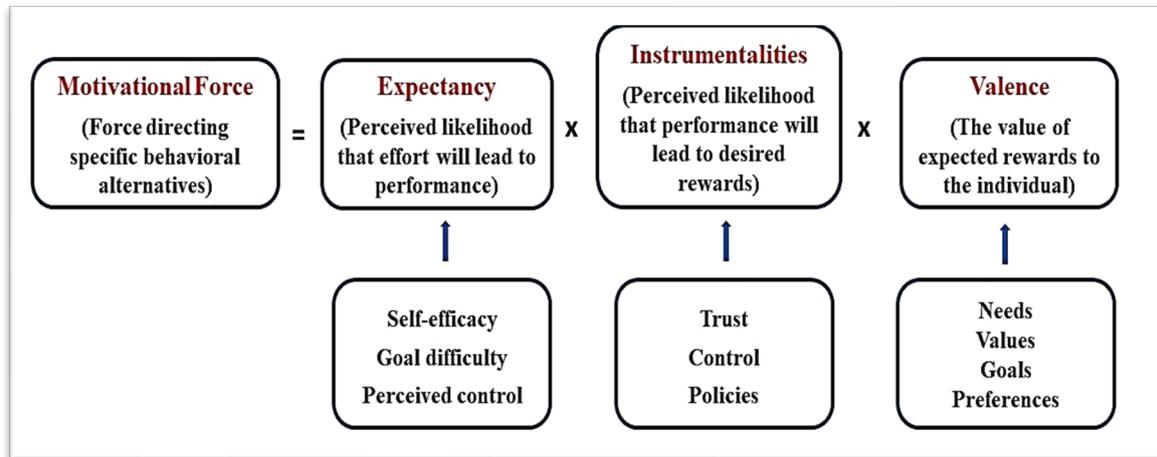
The theory of Expectancy is promising in providing a more comprehensive explanation for individual motivation. This theory suggested that individuals would be motivated if they anticipated a strong linkage between their efforts and the desired outcomes. Vroom theorised that motivation could be measured by a multiplicative function of the following factors:

- **Expectancy** reflects a person's belief that more effort will lead to better performance. With the necessary skills, knowledge, and support, people will be more confident to engage in work. Also, they are likely to engage in tasks that are attainable and within their ability to influence.

- **Instrumentality** refers to one's belief that if the performance expectation is met, one will get rewards. Rewards can be in the form of praise, an increase in payment, a promotion, etc. An ambiguous rewarding policy provides employees a few clues about acceptable behaviour to form their expectations. Similarly, the lack of transparency and trust in leaders would weaken instrumentality.

- **Valence**, the third component, says whether a person values the reward received, based on his needs, values, goals, and preferences. A salary increase may be appealing to many but not all employees because of individual differences. It is, therefore, ineffective to offer the same reward to all organisational employees.

Figure 1. Motivation and Expectation



(Source: Brian Francis Redmond, 2016)

2.4. The ties that bind

Ngo-Henha (2017) tried to explain employee turnover intention from the perspective of the job embeddedness theory. Accordingly, employees would be unlikely to leave if they had a valuable connection with their colleagues and felt integrated into an organisational network. Shifting to an unfamiliar working environment meant they had to sacrifice these links. Employees who felt a sense of embeddedness would not prefer this.

It was argued by Cropanzano (2005) that to develop a social relationship over time, entities must respect and abide by negotiated rules. Following this, Ngo-Henha (2017) proposed that the withdraw of employees could result from a breach of 'implicitly or explicitly agreed rules by management or by colleagues'. Another inference of the Social exchange theory for turnover was that employees would leave if they realised that their employers did not perform commitment sufficiently (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methods

The study follows a bottom-up design to investigate talents' perspective on TM issues in Vietnamese local government. An online survey was conducted with scholarship recipients in Danang city, the leading city in Vietnam in terms of promoting public human resources. Descriptive statistical methods and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) were used to analyse results. The authors then selected another ten scholarship recipients to join the in-depth interviews. By focusing on the talent perspective, the study sought description and

more explanation to fill possible gaps in understanding talent turnover and TM in Vietnamese local government.

3.2. Data collection

The online survey link was sent to participants via email addresses⁵. From October to November 2020, a total of 75 valid responses were collected through the online survey. Of the respondents, 46.1% worked in the local government before joining the scholarship program while the remaining 53.9% of respondents were just high-school students at the time of joining the program. After official recruitments, nearly 67% of respondents were tenured and only a small proportion of respondents, making up 32%, achieved leader or manager positions. The survey questionnaire included general information of respondents and measurement items selected based on the existing literature. The questions focused on talents' value, their expectancy, and their perceived TM practices. Opinions were measured with the 5-point Likert scale.

In addition to the online survey, interviews were conducted with open-ended questions, and respondents' answers were recorded. By doing this, respondents could express their perception freely and provide further explanation if necessary. This semi-structured interview included two main questions: 1) From your experience, can you share some problems with TM practices in Danang? 2) What do you consider as possible solutions to improve TM in the Danang government? Participants received a request to take part in an in-depth interview through Skype as it was impossible to have a face-to-face interview. They were informed that their answers would be kept confidential.

4. Results

4.1. Turnover intention

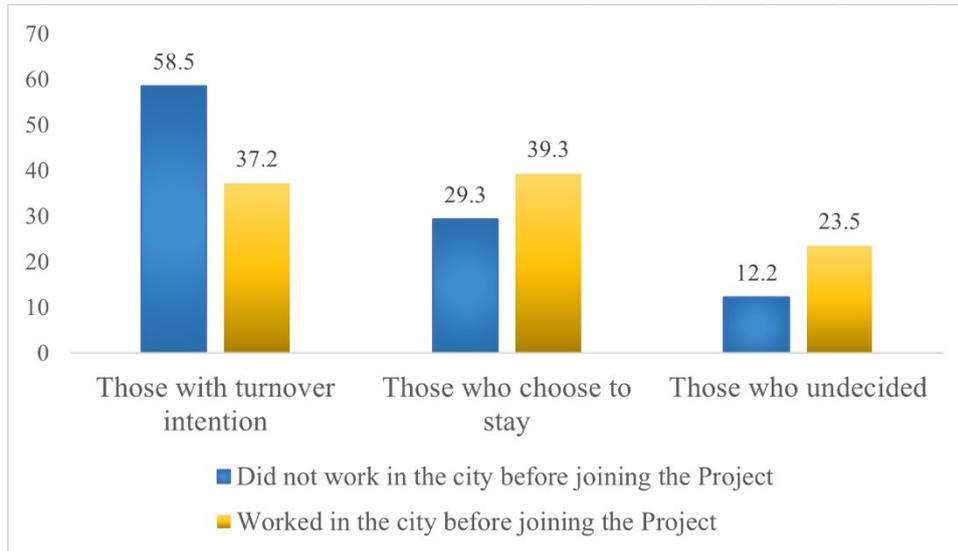
Results showed that except for 17.3% of undecided responses, the proportion of talents intended to quit was higher than those who stay. Of the participants with turnover intention, 28% would leave as soon as they found a suitable job, and 21.3% planned to quit after completing the term of commitment. Meanwhile, 33.3% of respondents planned to stay in the system even after completing the agreed term.

From the literature review, those with their prior working experience will experience 'the ties that bind' and thus less inclined to quit. Indeed, the Danang government intends to prioritise granting scholarships to public officials over students to reduce talent turnover. The survey showed, as expected, a lower proportion of turnover intention (37.2%) and a higher proportion

⁵ Provided by Danang Center for the Promotion of Human Resource Development

of intention to remain in the former subject (39.3%) as compared to the latter one (58.5% and 29.3%, respectively).

Figure 2. The turnover intention according to two groups of participants



4.2. Perceived likelihood that effort will lead to performance

Effort could not always guarantee performance unless there were clear instructions, proper training, and a supporting working-environment. However, the data implies a weak expectancy towards the linkage of Effort – Performance among talents.

Acceptable performances have not been specified and communicated

About 38.8% of survey respondents reported that unclear task description was the most difficult for their performances. Many respondents, particularly those who were inexperienced, struggled to determine expected performance. The problem of job description also resulted in poor task distribution. Some respondents complained that they felt overloaded at work and sometimes were assigned tasks beyond their duties. Additional comments from respondents showed that the quality of performance evaluation was concerned, with the tendency to give everyone the same assessment-results.

Usefulness of training course

The survey results showed an interesting picture. About 65.3% of participants reported that they had high accessibility to these courses. However, the proportion of participants who highly evaluated the applicability and the usefulness of these courses was much lower, only 30.6%. Conversely, 29% of respondents said that these courses were useless and time-consuming.

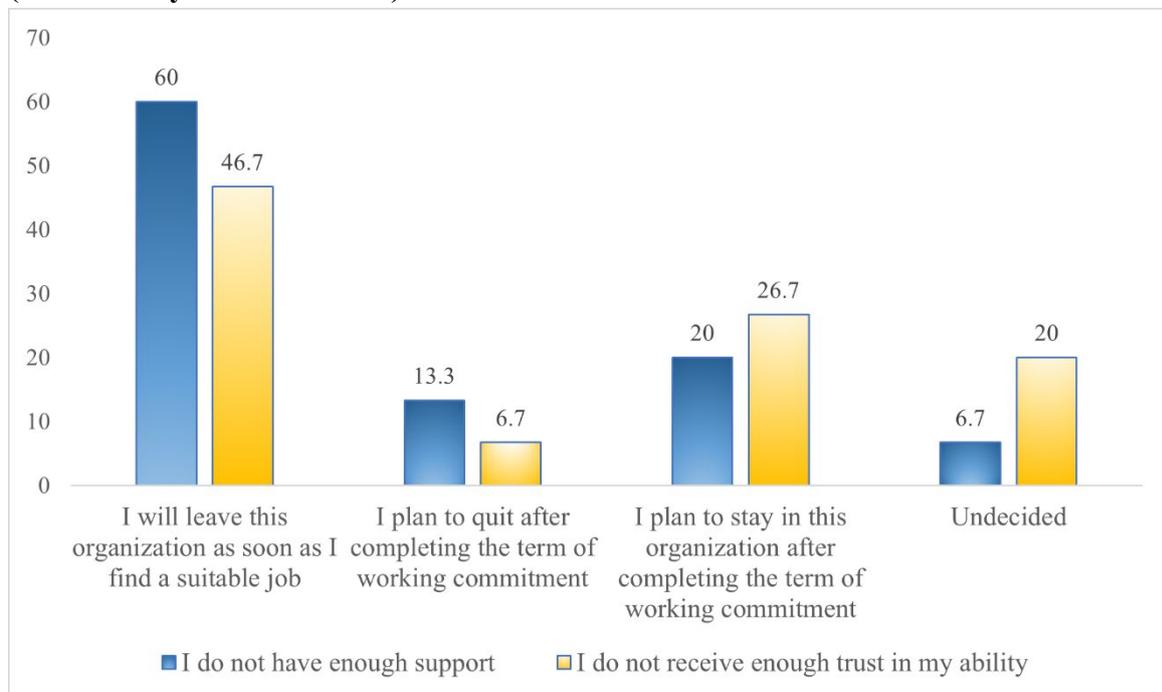
Working environment

An interviewee from the Department of Health revealed that: *“We are in positions to receive backlash in the workplace. Other older co-workers do not like us. They are afraid that the newcomers might hinder them from having chances to be promoted.”*

This interviewee said enthusiasm in doing her job was regarded as attention-seeking. Her boss did not consider her suggestions carefully. A common excuse from the rigid system was her limited understanding of the Vietnamese situation. The fact that her privilege of studying abroad became a disadvantage instead of being an advantage.

From the online survey, the study found that only 28.9% of respondents confirmed they had their voice in decision making. For the two responses ‘I do not have enough support from my supervisor and colleagues’ and ‘I do not gain enough trust from others and make them believe in my competence’, many participants with turnover intention⁶ said ‘yes’, respectively with 73.3% and 53.4%. The figures were significantly higher than that of those who might stay (20% and 26.7% respectively), supporting the prediction that most talents would leave when they did not perceive a supportive working environment.

Figure 3. The perception of working environment among different participant groups (classified by their intention)



⁶ Including respondents who would leave as soon as they found a suitable job and those who planned to quit after completing the term of working commitment.

4.3. The value of expected rewards to the individual

The uni-formality of civil service management in Vietnam has caused the same TM issues in every city of this country. The Vietnam seniority system is associated with a rigid mechanism of payment and promotion, which does not reflect the capacity and actual performance of employees. As Danang city government resembles the civil service in Vietnam, its TM also shares a similar status described above, including heavy administration, the rigid mechanism of payment and promotion and the pressure of top-down management⁷.

Income

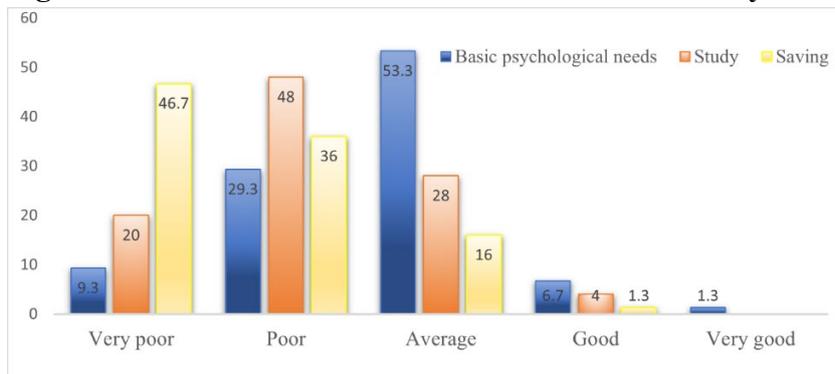
The low salary was considered a critical issue in the current TM practices. Most talents agreed that their income could not satisfy their personal needs, especially for saving. About 38.7% of survey respondents took a second job, admitting that they felt overloaded at work and did not have enough time to rejuvenate their energy. Other respondents could not manage time for part-time jobs (29.3%) or find additional suitable jobs (6.7%). A respondent also said that his salary was too low compared to that of his peers.

The findings showed that low income was a pushed factor. About 85.7% of respondents who might leave as soon as they found a suitable job ranked the importance of financial rewards from 'important' to 'very important'. About 75% of those who planned to quit after completing their obligations shared the same view.

All in-depth interviewees agreed that to improve the TM, local government should provide 'Income support and compensation related to performance'. An interviewee from the Danang Institute of Socio-Economic Development suggested that: "*The central government should allow local governments to have an extent of financial autonomy and more decision-making power regarding the salary for public officials*". However, if financial support were allowed, an interviewee from the Department of Home Affairs added, "*these beneficiaries should not be limited to only scholarship recipients, but also for other public workforce working in the city government as well*". He explained that financial support for all employees rather than just for talents would prevent a sense of unfair treatment, which might result in a toxic working environment.

⁷ Danang city government could not remain its financial talent retention initiative because of the national regulatory constraints. Before 2015, the city provided talents a monthly subsidy of 1 million VND to ease their financial concern, encouraging them to be dedicated to their job. The city also expressed confidence in the ability to maintain this support with its budget. However, such financial assistance has not been regulated in any legal document issued by the central government. For that reason, since 2015, it was officially ended, following a request from the central government to ensure the similarity among different localities in the country.

Figure 4. To what extent the current income can satisfy these following needs



Job fit

A look at talent expectation showed that job fit was perceived as the most attractive outcome among 13 different possible outcomes, either for those with or without turnover intention (mean values of ‘opportunities to utilise your acquired knowledge’ stood at 4.43 and 4.52, respectively). This figure suggests that to successfully retain talents, reinforcing job fit for talent should be a priority in TM activities.

Table 1. How important is each of the following outcomes

	Those with turnover intention		Those who choose to stay		Those who undecided	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Having a stable job	3.22	1.158	4.40	1.000	2.92	.862
Getting an incentive pay or raise	4.38	.861	3.80	.816	4.15	.987
Opportunities for promotion	3.65	1.160	4.04	.889	3.77	.725
Being recognized	4.32	.669	4.20	.707	4.00	.816
Receiving support from managers and colleagues	4.19	.938	4.32	.802	4.08	.760
Opportunities to take initiative	3.49	1.017	4.12	.971	3.69	.751
Having a feeling of accomplishment	3.89	1.075	4.32	.852	4.00	.816
Opportunities to gain experiences	3.32	1.203	4.12	1.092	3.69	.947
Training opportunities to improve academic qualification	3.30	1.244	3.84	1.179	3.38	1.044
Opportunities to utilize your acquired knowledge	4.43	.647	4.52	.714	3.85	.987
Involving in decision making	3.68	1.029	4.36	.810	3.85	.801
Develop a network with other talents	3.65	1.033	4.20	1.041	3.62	.961
Short-term trainings to improve skills relating the job assigned	2.74	1.196	3.74	1.327	3.43	.976

Desire to contribute

Not all respondents with Public Service Motivation chose to stay. They might leave when several extrinsic motivational factors such as financial rewards, promotion opportunities, job stability and appraisal, could not be satisfied. Therefore, local governments cannot simply rely on Public Service Motivation to retain talents. It would also be unrealistic to ask talents to sacrifice their basic needs or self-interest for the sake of others.

Table 2. How important is each of the following abilities

	Those with turnover intention		Those who choose to stay		Those who undecided	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Serving the public	3.46	0.96	4.48	0.653	4.15	0.689
Contributing to the city's development	3.46	1.016	4.44	0.712	4.15	0.689

4.4. Perceived likelihood that performance will lead to desired rewards

Probability of getting desired rewards

Table 3 shows the respondents' perception of the probability of achieving different outcomes. Accordingly, the two remaining variables of 'getting an incentive pay' and 'getting a promotion' got quite low mean values (less than 3). From this, it was clear that although monetary rewards and getting promotions were typical desired outcomes of any employees, most scholarship recipients working in Vietnamese local governments were less likely to receive them. Even when they perform well, appreciation hardly leads to income bonuses or promotions. This was due to characteristics of the seniority system, where remuneration and promotion were based on duration rather than good performances.

Table 3. The likelihood of each event occurring if talents work hard and efficient

Probability of	N	Mean	SD
Getting an incentive pay or raise	75	2.12	1.219
Getting a promotion	75	2.87	1.212
Having more control over my job	75	3.72	.994
Being recognised	75	3.95	.957
<i>Valid N (listwise)</i>	75		

How did the city abide by its prior commitments?

Job fit, job stability, and accommodation support are rewards for talents promised by the Danang city government. If the city insufficiently abides by its prior commitments, talents could be demotivated in performing expected behaviours as an inescapable result from their weak expectancy. However, there were 36.6%⁸ of respondents who perceived that the city insufficiently abided by its prior commitment regarding job fit for policy participators. Also, there were 57.9%⁹ of respondents who claimed that the city did not keep their promises to make sure talents have stable jobs.

Of the interviewees, six complained that many organisations have run out of payroll quotas. Three interviewees revealed that they could not participate in the recruitment exam for civil servants because of unfavourable treatment they received at workplaces. Meanwhile, one interviewee shared that he failed in the examination of civil servants.

Interviewees also drew attention to the fact that there was a lack of consensus among relevant competent authorities in providing accommodation support. Accordingly, while HR development agencies have been talking about it as a promising talent retention solution, the Department of Construction has been allowing only poor households or married couples to access the local social housing. *“There are many young talents like me who fail to meet these criteria despite the fact that we really need a place to live”*, stated an interviewee from the Danang Center for the Promotion of Human Resource Development. Also, this kind of support was perceived as unfeasible at the moment for several reasons including unavailable social houses and the rental registration suspension¹⁰.

5. Discussions

The online survey provides evidence that prioritising public officials over high-school students in scholarship-granting could reduce the possibility of talent turnover. Those with working experience in local government might develop a strong network and have a higher sense of embeddedness in their organisations. In the seniority administration, their chances of promotion are also higher. These reasons might reduce their turnover intention.

It was found that ambiguous job descriptions obstruct talents’ performances. In Vietnam, the central government annually assigns payroll quotas and corresponding administrative

⁸ The total of ‘Strongly disagree’ and ‘Disagree’

⁹ The total of ‘Strongly disagree’ and ‘Disagree’

¹⁰ Since transparency in arranging affordable housing has been questioned, an inspection has been taken place to withdraw houses arranged for the wrong hands. A rental registration suspension has been happening at the same time as the inspection. During this ongoing suspension, which could be time-consuming, the city government would be unable to provide accommodation support for talents who need it.



management funding to local governments, considering the necessity of permanent working positions in these organisations. Under this mechanism, local organisations must provide a job description for each job position. For not losing quotas, many organisations have come up with ambiguous job descriptions and incorrectly anticipated workload.

Many cities in Vietnam may gain more financial autonomy to provide incentive income for public personnel with the national wage reform. However, at present, these scenarios have just existed on the table of discussion. This was due to the unpredictable context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Except for Ho Chi Minh City, many other cities must follow the national legal framework and thus cannot proactively provide appropriate and effective rewards for talents.

In the Vietnamese civil service management, issues of leadership style and working environment in TM have historically not received enough attention. These historical characteristics include authoritarianism, Soviet-style centralisation, and political influence. As a result, the low salary was not the only reason for the intention of leaving. Most talents would leave when they did not receive enough support and trust from colleagues. Results showed the tension between talents and other employees. These talents have represented a new workforce burning to prove themselves with new approaches. However, many talents have been working under the constraint of older employees. There was a dilemma as well. Although talents are expected to bring changes, the old workforce expressed the attitude of change resistance at the same time.

The top-down management in Vietnam may bring challenges in various ways for local governments to implement their promises with talents. Surveys show that job fit is the most expected outcome of talent. The local government also promises job fit for scholarship recipients with the Decision 27/QD-UBND. However, this commitment was affected by the implementation of Resolution 39/NQ-TW, issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, on downsizing and restructuring public personnel. Under the effect of Resolution 39/NQ-TW, the city must terminate all labour contracts¹¹ in agencies of the State at the end of 2018. As a result, talents who were working under labour contracts¹² could be removed from the system. To not lose these talents, the city transferred them to public non-business units where the labour contract is legal under Vietnamese law. However, concern about job fit has been raised with this solution.

¹¹ Under Vietnamese laws, public employees are people who work in public non-business units, under working contracts, and salaried from salary funds of public non-business units (According to Law on Public Employees). Cadres and Civil servants include people who mainly work in agencies of the State, under working contracts, and salaried from the State budget (According to Law on Cadres and Civil servants). Other employees work under labor contracts instead of working contracts and are regulated by the Labor Code.

¹² Before 2015, Danang city proactively recruited graduated talents, without official exams, and independently paid full salary and allowances (Decision 27/QD-UBND) to these talents by using the abundance of the local budget. This employment relationship was represented in the form of labor contracts.

Additionally, with the Law on Public employees amended in 2019, the indefinite term contract will no longer apply to new public employees recruited in public non-business units since July 01, 2020. This may reduce the attractiveness of jobs in the public sector as job stability would no longer be guaranteed.

6. Recommendations

In short, this paper showed how poor TM is reflected in talent turnover intention. It drew attention to the fact that the prestige of HR development programs in the public sector is at risk. Pressure from top-down management in Vietnam prevents local government from proactive and effective talent retention solutions. Unclear job descriptions and lack of support were the main troubles faced by talents. Based on findings and analyses, it comes up with some suggestions to improve TM in the Vietnamese local government.

Firstly, as turnover can result from a breach of prior commitments, local governments should reinforce their promises, especially job fit for talent. At the same time, authorities should review related locally-issued documents and only keep feasible regulations. For the case of Danang city, officially stating a type of support which the government fails to provide would be responsible for the HR development program's weaker prestige.

Secondly, a far more effective approach would be addressing the problem of income. Talent retaining could hardly be successful without sufficient salary and the congruence between rewards and performances. Vietnam should allow its local government to proactively design and implement effective reward policies and accelerate the shifting from a seniority payment to a performance-based payment system.

Thirdly, Vietnamese local governments should also pay attention to clarifying desired job performances. Clear, detailed, and well-understood description would enhance the self-efficacy of employed talent. Moreover, it is the first step for replacing the current superficial performance evaluation with a competency-based evaluation system, which would continue to nurture talent motivation at work. Besides, local governments should provide training courses based on the demand for job positions instead of offering everyone the same training package.

Finally, leaders and managers need to improve the working environment and eliminate prejudice on the inexperience of talent. Local governments should embrace initiatives and promote breakthrough mechanisms in appointing talents with outstanding performance into leader and management positions.

This study may not be free from limitations. *First*, the problem of turnover is complicated and there is a lack of integrative turnover theories to comprehend the full scale of this phenomenon. This paper may, therefore, not have addressed all motivation factors which affect talents'



intention. *Second*, recruiting respondents via social media potentially brings bias, in which, talents with low job satisfaction might be more proactive in joining the survey. Future studies should address these issues.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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