

All on Board, Take Off!

An Example of Practitioner's Research on Teachers' Professional Well-being in Higher Education in Their Early Career Stages

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Abstract

Organisations compete on the labour market for highly educated staff and put a lot of effort in attracting new employees. However, high percentages of newly recruited employees leave the organisation within one year. Good onboarding practices and good practices in the stage after onboarding, the take-off stage, could increase retention rates in the early career stages of professionals.

In this study an example of practitioner's research is presented on newly hired teachers' professional well-being in higher education in their early career stages. Two batches of newly hired teachers at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands were studied in the context of improving HR practices.

Research on newly hired teachers revealed the importance of good onboarding practices and the crucial role of team leaders in retaining and motivating newly hired teaching staff.

Keywords: onboarding, professional well-being, employee journey, higher education, employee retention

1. Introduction

The career start of newly hired employees within organisations is of crucial importance for employee retention. On average, approximately 20 % of the employees leave the organisation within the first year of their employment (Nelms, 2020; Bauer, 2018).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) found in 2018 an overall staff turnover rate in higher education in the United States of 16 % in the first year of employment. In 2019 (HERC) it was found that 25 % of new hires in higher education institutions in the United States left their job within the first year. In the United Kingdom it was found in 2019 (CIPD) that the average turnover rate in the first year of employment in education (primary, secondary and higher education) was 17 %. For the Netherlands, no figures for staff turnover in the first year of employment are available, but the average turnover rates are 14 % for academic staff in general and 23 % for academic staff without tenure (VSNU, 2020).

Staff turnover in the first year of employment is therefore a significant concern for institutions for higher education, since it is costly and can cause disruption in the execution of daily educational tasks, besides the work load it causes to the HR department and people involved in recruitment activities such as job interviews.

Staff turnover in the first year can be reduced with the help of a good onboarding programme. Onboarding can be defined as the process of hiring and integrating new employees into the organisation and familiarise them with the company's culture, systems, procedures and expectations. A strong onboarding programme can have a significant positive impact on staff turnover rates (Carucci, 2018; Joseph & Sridevi, 2015; Hillman, 2010; SHRM, 2018; Glassdoor, 2015). Besides that, onboarding has a positive effect on productivity, the time-to-productivity (Bennet, 2014), employee engagement (BHG, 2014), and on customer satisfaction (Kim & Kao, 2014).

In this study the case of NHL Stenden, a university of applied sciences in the Netherlands, is presented. The main location is situated in the north of the Netherland in the city of Leeuwarden. The university has approximately 25,000 students and about 2,500 employees (NHL Stenden, 2022). In the period 2019-2021 172 new teachers were

hired. There were several reasons for this wave of new people. Firstly, newly recruited teachers were hired for replacing due to normal staff turn-over. Secondly, the Dutch government provided all educational institutions in the Netherlands with extra funding in order to facilitate students who might have suffered study delay and other deficiencies due to the corona pandemic. Thirdly, the university developed a new educational concept called Design Based Education. It was thought that people fresh from the workforce could boost the transition to the concept. Fourthly, the university was anticipating on the expected outflow of large numbers of elderly teachers due to retirement (de Jong, Korfage & Wind, 2021).

NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences is characterised by three aspects. The first is the overarching educational concept of Design Based Education (DBE). Features of DBE are design thinking, multidisciplinary co-operation and personal leadership. The students work on real-life issues in an iterative way in order to identify meaningful solutions. The second aspect is that of Result-responsible Teams (RRT). Responsibilities are placed as low as possible in the organisation. Teams are given the authority to self-manage primary processes. The third aspect is a logical result of the second, and is called Servant Leadership (SL). This is a coaching and facilitating management style (NHL Stenden, 2019).

Those three aspects, are explicitly mentioned and discussed in the procedures for recruiting and hiring.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section several concepts will be explored and defined. Firstly, the concept of the employee journey will be discussed. Secondly, the concept of professional well-being will be discussed.

2.1 Employee Journey

The concept of employee journey is derived from the marketing concept 'customer journey'. It is a metaphor, albeit quite appealing. The employee journey is a kind of idealised mapped out road, including exit opportunities, forks, roundabouts, and junctions.

A quick internet search (Appendix I) shows that the concept of the employee journey is predominantly in use by consultancy agencies in countries such as the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

Although the term employee journey is widely used in practice, the academic exploration of the concept is limited and of recent date (Kursunluoglu, 2020; Kursunluoglu & Mihci, 2019; Hüzle & Kasper, 2018). In a handful of papers, the concept is mentioned in a byline (Zach & Krizaj, 2017; Gruber et al., 2015; Prentice et al., 1998). In current handbooks such as Hook, Jenkins & Foot (2017), Gómez-Mejía, Balkin & Cardy (2015), Dickmann, Brester & Sparrow, 2016; Sparrow (2010), Beardwell & Claydon (2017), Harzing & Pinnington (2014) the concept of the employee journey is not mentioned at all.

Since the concept of the employee journey is quite young and given the fact that it is not yet crystallized in academic literature, it is no wonder that most consultancy agencies offer their self-developed interpretation of the employee journey. Elements and terms of the several representations of the employee journey are: employer branding, recruiting, hiring, onboarding, induction, engagement, development, acceleration, master skills, integration, performance, growth, career progress, exit, offboarding, departure. Piersma & Streppel (2018) state that each organization should develop its own tailor-made employee journey.

One of the few academic publications that presents an explicit and substantiated description of the employee journey is that of Piersma & Streppel (2019). They describe the employee journey as follows. The employee journey is the journey of an employee within an organisation. The journey starts at the moment of the first contact with the organisation and ends when the employee leaves the organisation. During the journey the employee encounters several touchpoints, shaping the perception of the employee about the organisation. Examples of these touchpoints are the job interview or the first working day. The perception of the employee can be negative or positive. It is important for an organisation to identify the touchpoints and how they are perceived. Positive experiences are thought to have a positive impact on employee motivation. According to Piersma & Streppel (2019) reality shows that most touchpoints generate negative experiences. They present examples such as the absence of support and coaching in the period of onboarding and the start of the career at the organisation, badly conducted appraisal interviews and lack of attention for employees.

Piersma & Streppel (2019) distinguish four stages in their representation of the employee journey: pre-inflow, inflow, throughflow and outflow.

The stage of *pre-flow* describes the period before an employee actually starts with his job. The onset is when the candidate hears about the organisation for the first time. When a company must compete for employees, employer

branding is important. Piersma & Streppel (2019) describe employer branding as obtaining and maintaining an authentic and distinctive preferred position as an employer in the mindset of (potential) employees and their influencers with the aim of attracting and retaining the right employees. The stage of *inflow* is described as the period of the first working day till the moment the employee can work independently. In this stage the employee familiarises with the organisation, gets acquainted with procedures, and gets induced in the organisation’s culture. This stage can also involve some training on the job. Piersma & Streppel (2019) label the first part of the inflow stage as the period of onboarding. The third stage of the employee journey is labelled as *throughflow*. This stage will comprise the largest part of the employees’ careers. This stage is characterised by performing, further training, developing expertise and using career opportunities within the organisation. The fourth stage, labelled as *outflow*, describe the period of employees leaving the organisation. This can have several causes, such as retirement, or employees deciding to develop their career within another organisation. In terms of the employee journey, it is in the interest of the organisation that employees leave with a positive feeling.

Another frequently used term is that of the ‘employee experience’ (Morgan, 2017; Batat, 2022). Although the concepts are overlapping, the perspectives differ. In the employee experience, the needs and wants of the employee are the focus point, whereas the employee journey is more or less a tool or an approach to manage the employee experience. Becker & Bolink (2018) describe the distinction between the employee experience and employee journey as follows: *The employee experience encompasses all of an employee’s interactions with an organisation, right from they even join until after they leave. In the employee journey, you identify and map out all of these interactions, also known as touchpoints*” (p. 11). McKelvey & Frank (2018) merged the employee experience and the employee journey into what they call ‘employee experience mapping’.

Like the concept of the employee journey, the concept of the employee experience has yet not found its way to handbooks such as Hook, Jenkins & Foo (2017), Gómez-Mejía, Balkin & Cardy (2015), Dickmann, Brester & Sparrow (2016), Sparrow (2010), Beardwell & Claydon (2017), Harzing & Pinnington (2014).

A preliminary visualization of the employee journey of teachers of NHL Stenden University is presented in Figure 1.

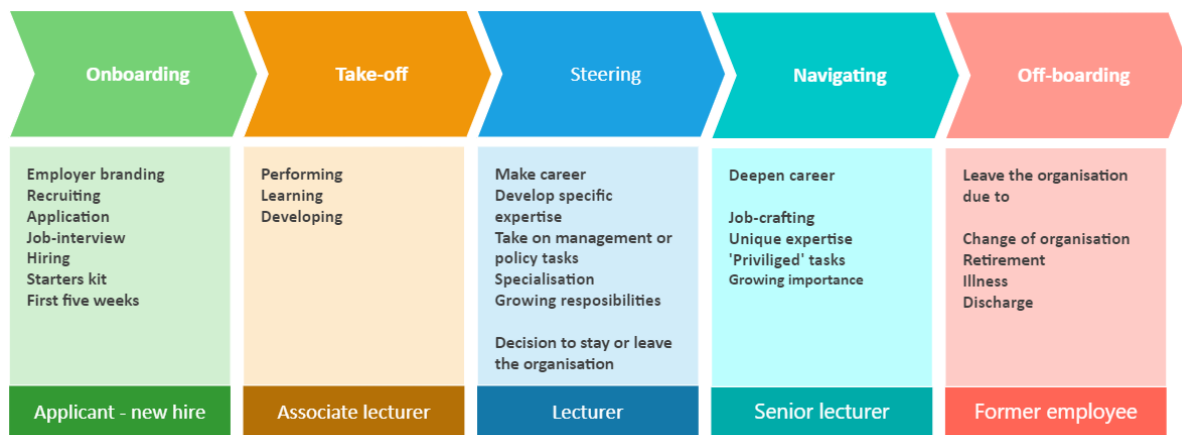


Figure 1. Employee journey of teaching staff of NHL Stenden University

In this research, the focus is on teaching staff. Universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands also a significant percentage of non-teaching employees. On average, Dutch universities of applied sciences employ approximately 61 per cent teaching staff and 39 per cent supporting staff (VH, 2019). In the theoretical section of this paper, it will be explained what the specifics are of the employee journey of teachers.

2.2 Professional Well-being

In literature, several terms are applied to label the concept of content employees: employee satisfaction (Kurdi, Alshuridesh & Alnaser, 2020; Gregory, 2011; Messmer, 2005), job satisfaction (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Judge, Zhang & Glerum, 2020; Rafferty & Griffin, 2009), employee engagement (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019; Kwon & Kim, 2020), employee happiness (Al-Ali et al., 2019; Adnan Bataineh, 2019).

Underlying assumption is that there is a causal relationship between employee satisfaction and productivity. In the case of this university: a high level of employee satisfaction is supposed to have a positive effect on students' experience and might therefore lead to a higher quality of education. Some support for this assumption can be found (Azmy, 2019; Ieon & Choi, 2012; Gregory, 2011). Nevertheless, there is not much research on the relationship between teachers' well-being and student satisfaction or student performance.

For this research the term 'professional well-being' was coined. The terms employee satisfaction or job satisfaction or employee happiness imply that the employee must kept satisfied or happy at all costs, an assumption underlying many employee satisfaction surveys. The term employee engagement can imply employees that are very engaged with the organisation, for instance nurses or teachers, but nevertheless might dispirited or distressed due to work circumstances. The term professional well-being entails a certain level of agency. In this research professional well-being is defined as: The employee, in this case the starting lecturer, feels capable to execute the task, feels supported by the team leader and the team and has the means and resources to carry out the task.

This definition is based upon the following model and theories:

1. Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a, 2000b)
2. Motivation-hygiene theory (Herzberg, 2005, Herzberg, 2008)
3. Leader Autonomy Support (Slemp et al., 2018)
4. Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001)
5. Teacher's concern theory (Fuller, 1974, Velzen et al., 2010)

In the following section, each of these approaches will be discussed.

In Deci & Ryan's self-determination theory (2000a, 2000b) the drivers of human behaviour are described. In this theory, three psycho-social needs are identified, labelled as relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

Employees desire good relationships with their colleagues, leader and in the case of NHL Stenden University good relationships with students. The need for relatedness is fostered by respect, care for each other, an inclusive environment and safety. Engagement with other people is impeded by competition, conflicts, cliques, and an entrenched culture (Cook & Artino, 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2000a, 2000b).

The fulfilment of the need for competence depends on the tasks the employee is assigned with. Employee thrive when they are occupied with a mix of tasks that are challenging as well as satisfying and resulting into success. Feelings of competence are hindered by too many and too complex challenges which lead to frustration (Cook & Artino, 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2000a, 2000b).

The need for autonomy concerns the control space of the employee. This need will be met when the employee has space to make choices, when the rationale behind certain policies is clear and when emotions are recognized. The need for autonomy can be impaired by incentives, too tight regulations or too much control (Cook & Artino, 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2000a, 2000b).

Workers thrive when the three psycho-social needs – that can be entirely different for each individual employee – are met.

Herzberg (2005, 2008) distinguishes two dimensions in his model: motivation and hygiene. On the motivation dimension, the employee can have a position between low motivation and high motivation. On the hygiene dimension, the employee can have a position between working in circumstances of low hygiene and of high hygiene. The hygiene dimension entails labour conditions such as circumstances, salaries and incentives, atmosphere, facilities, physical and psychological safety.

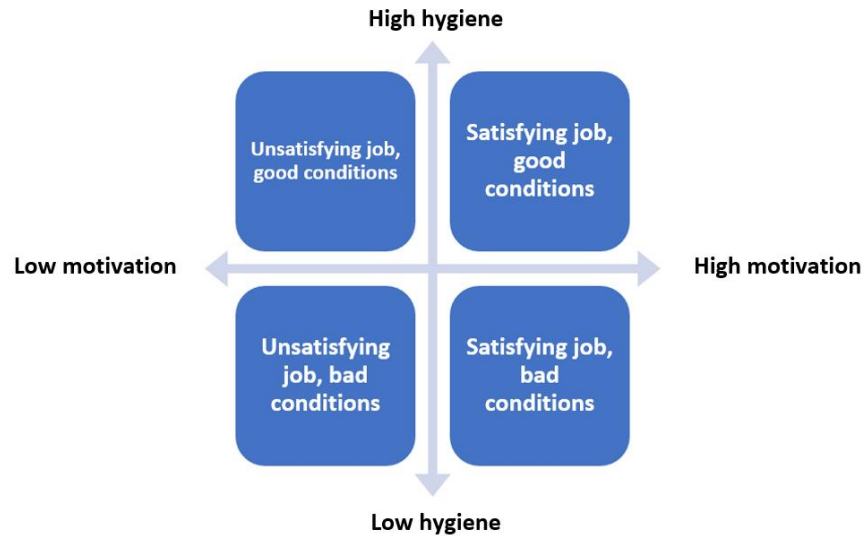


Figure 2. The four quadrants of motivation and hygiene

An employee positioned in the quadrant of high hygiene and high motivation will experience a high degree of professional well-being. An employee positioned in the quadrant of low motivation and low hygiene experiences a low degree of professional well-being. An employee positioned in the quadrant of low motivation and high hygiene, has a comfortable but lowly satisfying job. An employee in the quadrant of high motivation and low hygiene, practises a meaningful profession under heavy conditions.

The motivation-hygiene theory provides ample opportunities for identifying and analysing the level of professional well-being.

Leader autonomy support (LAS) is a leadership style that utilises the employees' motivation optimally. LAS includes aspects of facilitating leadership and servant leadership. Essential is a company culture that is based upon support and trust when it comes to the relationship between employees and their supervisors. This leadership style is characterised by room for the employee's perspective, the encouragement of initiatives, choice and control space. Informal communication is of more importance than formal communication, there is an atmosphere of trust instead of regulations and control, and there is a constrained practice of sanctions and rewards (Slemp et al., 2018).

LAS starts from the premise that leadership style is one of the most important factors contributing to motivation and engagement. This premise is supported by outcomes of previously conducted research (Jensen, 2018; Guterressa, Armei & Rofiaty, 2020; Kolk, Van Veen-Dirks & Ter Bogt, 2019). In other words and put in the context of the university: team leaders' behaviour is essential for teachers' professional well-being.

In the job demands-resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001) work stress is considered as a reaction to the gap between the demands and the means the employee has available in order to fulfil these demands. *Job demands* are the aspects of a job that require physical and/or psychological efforts, resulting in for instance physical and mental tiredness. *Job resources* are the means, instruments, the employee can apply in order to execute the tasks. *Workplace sources* are material and immaterial facilities provided to the employee, in the case of the university: smart boards (material sources) and coursebooks on the electronic learning environment (immaterial). *Personal sources* concern the employee's knowledge and skills, but in particular personality traits and features, as for instance expressed in the Big Five Personality Traits. The meaning and purpose of the job are considered by Bakker & Albrecht (2018) as resources. A job experienced as meaningful and purposeful, is a valuable and powerful source.

In a healthy professional environment, sources are not only used when executing a task; satisfying work does replenish sources as well. In the case of universities: student contact might cost energy, but generates energy as well.

The term 'teacher's concerns' (Fuller, 1974) can be described as the topic that are on top of the mind of the teacher. These teacher's concerns show a development, starting teachers have other concerns than their experienced

colleagues (Velzen et al., 2010; Swennen, Jörg & Korthagen, 2004). The following stages of teacher's concerns can be distinguished.

Self-concerns. In the initial stage the starter teacher is mainly occupied with self-concerns. These are topics such as: "Do the students like me, are my lessons according to plan, are my students participating, to what extent have I mastered the contents, am I an actual teacher?"

Instructional concerns. In this stage, in practice overlapping the previous, the teacher gets concerned with the development of teaching skills: "Did I select the right content, do I have too much or too little material for my lessons, have I applied effective didactic working methods, have I achieved the goals?"

Students' needs concerns. In this stage, the teacher gets more mental space and more eye for the students' needs: "Do I offer what students must and want to learn, am I aware of students who struggle, how can I fairly assess students' progress?"

Overall educational concerns. In this stage, lecturers get more space in their mind to consider educational and organisational issues. Examples "To what extent is our educational concept in line with the science of learning, how can we organise our processes more efficiently?"

These stages of development are not a law of nature. Teachers pass through these stages in their own pace. It is also possible to experience concerns in more stages.

Teacher training courses take the stages of professional development, in most occasions unknowingly, into account when educating teachers. There is hardly information available to what extent new teachers in higher education, most of them lacking educational experience, are provided with the room to pass through these stages.

The theories discussed above, the self-determination theory, the motivation-hygiene theory, the leader autonomy support theory, the job demands-resources theory, the teachers' concerns theory can be regarded as perspectives on HR-practices and as components that contribute to the definition of the concept of professional well-being.

In this study, professional well-being is defined as: The employee, in this case the starting lecturer, feels capable to execute the task, feels supported by the team leader and the team, and has the means and resources to carry out the task. It can be concluded that there is a high degree of professional well-being when the job meets the psycho-social needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, when the employee is highly motivated, and can perform under hygienic conditions, with leader autonomy support, when there is a balance between the organisation's demands and the employee's resources and, in case of higher education, when the teacher gets the opportunity to develop in their own pace.

The context of this study and of the theoretical foundation of the concept of professional well-being are visualised in Figure 3.

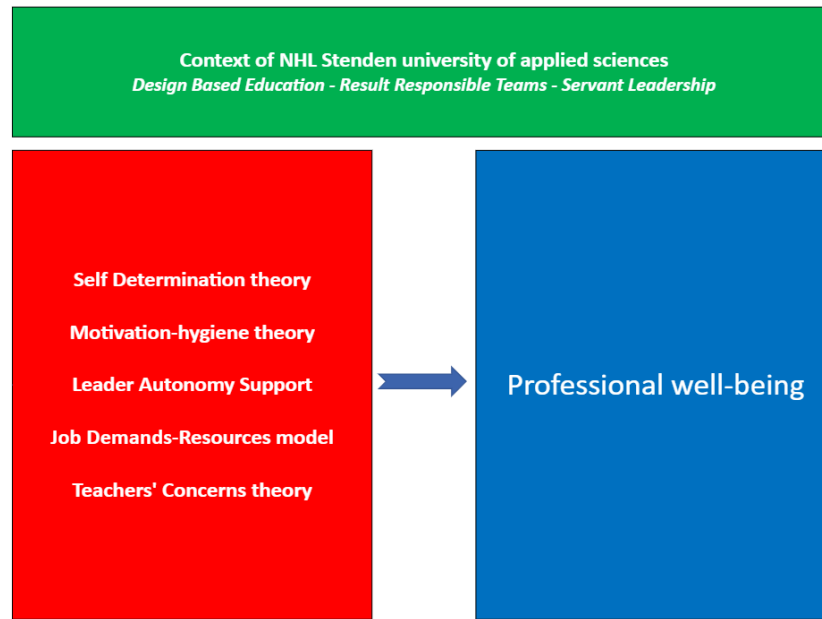


Figure 3. Visualisation of the context and the theoretical foundation of professional well-being

3. Research Questions

The analysis of the issues that go with the hiring of new staff and the description of the context of a mid-size university in the Netherlands and the theoretical framework on professional well-being, have led to the following research question: What is the impact of onboarding and take-off practices on professional well-being?

From this main question, the following sub-questions have been derived:

1. What is the impact of teaching practices on professional well-being in the stages of onboarding and take-off?
2. What is the impact of team membership on professional well-being in the stages of onboarding and take-off?
3. What is the impact of leadership on professional well-being in the stages of onboarding and take-off?

4. Methods of Data Collection

For this study, three reports written by practitioner-researchers were used. Practitioner research can be defined as research conducted by professionals, often in their own organisation, systematically collecting and analysing data for the purpose of improving the professional practice (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2023; Stringer, 2014). It is closely related to action research (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

In the period 2019-2022, the experiences of the newly hired teachers were researched three times. The batch of 106 newly hired teachers was researched by Reinders & Martens (2020). The batch of 2021 were in the onboarding stage of their employment researched by De Jong, Korfage & Wind (2021) and again, half a year later, by De Jong, Korfage & Spoelstra (2022). In Figure 4, this timeline of hiring and research is visualised.

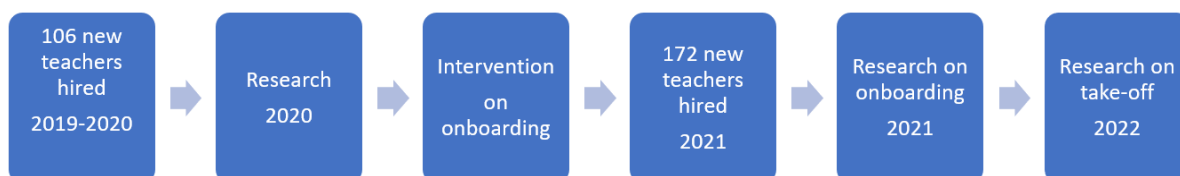


Figure 4. Timeline research on newly hired teachers

The outcomes of these three research projects, will be presented in the results section of this paper.

As can be seen in Figure 4, the population of this research is made up of the two waves of hiring new teachers at NHL Stenden University. In the beginning of the academic year 2019-2020 the university hired 106 teachers; a year later 172 teachers were hired.

The experience of the first group was researched by Reinders & Martens (2020). They conducted qualitative research. Twelve newly hired teachers were extensively interviewed about the first hundred days of their employment. This research led to improvements of the application and onboarding procedures.

The experience of the second group was researched twice. In October 2021, the newly hired teachers of the second wave received a questionnaire about their period of onboarding (N=176, n=103) (De Jong, Korfage & Wind, 2021). In this research, the period of onboarding was defined as the application period and the first five weeks of service. After approximately seven months of service, the second research project on this cohort was conducted. In this case, qualitative research was conducted. Seven lecturers, three team leader and two trainers were interviewed about the teachers' experiences after the period of onboarding, the take-off stage. The researchers stopped interviewing when the level of saturation was reached. In this case, two persons who were responsible for initial training of the newly hired teachers, presented a very complete picture of their experiences. Their perceptions and personal observations were corroborated in the interviews with the lecturers and the team leaders.

5. Results

In this section the results and conclusions of the three before mentioned research projects will be presented.

5.1 First Study

The batch of 106 newly hired that started in 2019 was researched by Reinders & Martens (2020). Their qualitative study on the first 100 days led to the following themes: Chaos, Connection, My role as a Lecturer, and the Desire for being Meaningful.

Chaos: A common experience was a chaotic first day and first week. Newly hired teachers struggled with practical issues such as an account, passes, laptops. Moreover, they were struggling with finding their way in systems and procedures. "I felt totally overwhelmed and lost. I had no idea what to do."

Connection: Newly hired teachers felt immediately connected with their fellow-teachers, students, team leader and the programme.

My role as a lecturer: Newly hired teachers experienced severe shortcomings in their teaching skills. They felt like being thrown into the deep. They had made a career switch from the industry to teaching and had to cope with issues such as: How to design a lesson? What are the learning objectives of this course? What is the content? How do I test the students?

Desire for being meaningful: Newly hired teachers want to contribute to the development of young adults and want to prepare them for their personal and professional future.

The conclusion of this research was that there was a dire need for improving the application procedures and the period of onboarding.

5.2 Second Study

The batch of 172 newly hired teachers was researched by De Jong, Korfage & Wind (2021). This quantitative research (n=103) was focussed on the period of onboarding, which they defined as the period of application and hiring as well as the first five weeks of actual working in the organisation.

The respondents reported that their main motives for a teaching career were the transfer of knowledge and skills to young people, perform meaningful work and opportunities for personal development. Wages were not mentioned as a reason for choosing for higher education.

An overwhelming majority of the applicants had experienced the application procedure as transparent. Raised expectations were met. The topic of the educational concept of the university, Design Based Education, was discussed in the job-interviews.

A vast majority of the newly hired teachers was satisfied with the reception in their department. Respondents added spontaneously phrases such as "it felt as a warm bath" to their questionnaire.

Teaching and educational activities were perceived as inspiring or very inspiring by 83 % of the respondents. However, 44 % of the respondents reported fatigue or heavy fatigue at the end of the working day.

The conclusion of this research was that the onboarding period had been a success. Participants looked back with positive feeling at the application procedure. The first experiences with teaching duties were in line with expectations

raised during the job interviews, the induction periods within the departments went well in general and teaching activities were regarded as positively.

5.3 Third Study

The same population that was researched in the second study (De Jong, Korfage & Spoelstra, 2022), was also the target group of the third study. They were researched approximately six months of the start, in terms of the employee journey, when they had just taken off. The main question of this research project was “What are the levels of professional well-being of recently started teachers?” In this case the researchers chose for a qualitative approach. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, team leader and teacher trainers.

It was found that the teachers got a lot of energy from their educational tasks. However, they felt substantial work pressure and experienced a lack of time for preparations and after care. They also experienced a diversity in educational and non-educational tasks. The teachers in the take-off stage experienced a range of diversity when it came to team membership. Some of them were part of a well-functioning and supportive team, but others felt a lack of cohesion and support. The teachers experienced also a variety of leadership. A part of them had a considerate and coaching team leader. However, a substantial part experienced a lack of interest from the team leader. In the interviews with the team leaders, the diversity of practices was confirmed. One of them: “To be honest, I have no clue which teachers are part of my team.”

There was a mixed appreciation of the working conditions. On the one hand, aspects of working conditions such as wages and perks were viewed as excellent. On the other hand, the daily practicalities were perceived as hard. Many teachers reported lack of educational support. In the first place, many of them felt empty-handed when promised class-ready material was not available or did not exist at all. For teachers in higher education, at the take-off stage of their educational career, with no prior training and experience in teaching, this is very demanding and has a severe negative impact on professional well-being. Furthermore, several lecturers reported a shortage of content knowledge of the subjects they teach, although they were recruited from the industry for their expertise. Another factor having a negative impact on professional well-being was the struggle with systems such as the electronic learning environment, student results registration application, intranet, Teams, Sharepoint, the HR systems application and the scheduling application. Several instances were reported of not-functioning screens in class-rooms, which resulted immediately in high levels of stress.

The overall conclusion of the research was as follows. Teachers during the take-off stage experienced high job-demands. They acquired a lot of energy from meaningful educational activities with students. The diversity of educational and non-educational tasks were perceived as aggravating. Being a member of a supportive team and working with a coaching team leader contributes to professional well-being. However, this was not the case for all teachers involved. The fact that teachers in the take-off stage of their career derive work pleasure from student contacts and the meaningfulness of their jobs, compensate to a certain degree the factors that have a negative impact on professional well-being.

5.4 Three Studies Compared

A major difference between the first and the second study was how the period of onboarding was perceived by the newly hired lecturers. The first study revealed many flaws in the onboarding practices of the university. The HR department took lessons and implemented a well-developed onboarding procedure. The second study revealed that the newly hired lecturers were very satisfied with this new procedure. The third study provided much insight in the daily practice of teachers during the take-off stage. It was revealed that the daily practice is perceived as tough but rewarding.

A recurrent theme is the energy teachers get from students contacts. Their educational activities are perceived as rewarding, energy giving and meaningful.

Another recurrent theme is the struggle with systems and application. The variety of systems and the different interfaces are mentioned as a factor impeding professional well-being.

6. Conclusions, Discussion, Recommendations

In this section the research questions will be answered. Secondly, the outcomes of the research will be compared with the theoretical frame. Thirdly, some reflection on the methodology will be presented. Finally, practical implications will be discussed and recommendations will be presented.

6.1 Conclusions

The objectives of this paper were presenting a case of onboarding research practices of a mid-size university of applied sciences, to contribute to the concept of the employee journey and to explore the concept of professional well-being.

It was found that practitioners research on own HR practices can provide input for actions for improvement. In the case of NHL Stenden University, these actions led to a significant adjustment of the onboarding practices. Good onboarding practices contribute to significantly higher employee retention rates and higher levels of employee satisfaction.

Another finding was that the concept of the employee journey can be useful in order to improve HR practices. Although the concept has not received much attention in academia, more and more organisations have adopted the employee journey as a means to improve HR policies.

In this research, the concepts of the self-determination theory, the motivation-hygiene theory, the leader autonomy support theory, the job-demands sources theory and the teachers' concerns theory have appeared to be valuable contributors to the concept of professional well-being. Professional well-being has proven to be a more fruitful concept than employee satisfaction or employee happiness.

In the next sections, the research questions and the main question will be answered.

Answering sub-question 1

What is the impact of teaching practices on professional well-being in the stage of onboarding and take-off?

It was found that in both the first stages of the teachers' careers, teaching activities were experienced as most rewarding and energy-giving. Educational activities, are reported to have a big impact on professional well-being.

Answering sub-question 2

What is the impact of team membership on professional well-being in the stages of onboarding and take-off?

The results show that being a member of a supportive team has a big impact on professional well-being. Not belonging to a team at all or to a team with little cohesion and support, has a negative impact. Approximately half of the newly hired teachers reported being a member of a supportive team, which means that a significant part of the population experiences limited or no support from their colleagues.

Answering sub-question 3

What is the impact of leadership on professional well-being in the stages of onboarding and take-off?

The team leader has a great impact on the professional well-being of teachers in the stages of onboarding and take-off. Teachers thrive under a supporting team leader; they experience discomfort when they feel neglected or overlooked.

Answering the main question

What is the impact of onboarding and take-off practices on professional well-being?

The recently started teachers experience high job-demands. They acquire a lot of energy from meaningful educational activities with students. The diversity of tasks and non-educational tasks are perceived as aggravating. Being a member of a supportive team and working with a coaching team leader, contribute to professional well-being. However, this is not the case for all recently started teachers.

The fact that the recently started teachers derive their work pleasure from student contacts and the meaningfulness of their job, compensate to a certain degree the factors that have a negative impact on professional well-being. It is unknown to what extent this compensation will sustain. Therefore, it is advised to continue monitoring with regard to professional well-being.

6.2 Comparison of the Outcomes With the Theoretical Framework

In this paper, professional well-being was chosen as the main concept. Below the findings will be held against the previously presented model.

6.2.1 Self-determination Theory

In Deci & Ryan (2000a, 2000b) the psychosocial needs were described as follows: the need for relatedness, autonomy and competence. The outcomes of this research show that lecturers attach much value to good relationships and colleagues and this need is largely met. With regard to the need for autonomy, it can be concluded that systems and schedules are experienced as quite directive. In the matter of the need for competence, it can be seen that teachers in the initial stages of their careers derive substantial pleasure from working with students. However, they also experience shortcomings on the matter of didactics and in several cases shortage of content knowledge. This has a negative impact on experienced competence.

6.2.2 Motivation-hygiene Theory

In Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory (2005, 2008) working conditions and employee motivation are crucial concepts. From our data, the picture arises that all lecturers are extremely motivated. The working conditions provide a mixed picture. On the one hand, it shows that material conditions are satisfactory. On the other, high levels of work pressure have a negative impact on working conditions.

The outcomes of this research tend to place the experiences of the participants in the quadrant of high motivation – low hygiene. From the perspective of professional well-being, this quadrant is characterised as meaningful work under relatively difficult conditions.

6.2.3 Leader Autonomy Support

The leader autonomy support theory represents a style of leadership that aims to employ employees' motivation. Main elements are support and understanding. The research projects showed divergent pictures of team leaders. In a number of occasions teachers say that they receive appreciation and support of their team leader, in line with the intentions of the leader autonomy support theory (Slemp et al., 2018). This management style makes employees flourish. However, a number of teachers did not experience nearness of their team leader. A few of them had very limited contact with their team leader. In general, newly hired teachers do not receive much feedback. They seldom hear in which job aspects they perform well and in which aspects they could improve. In general, teachers experience a low degree of leader autonomy support.

6.2.4 Job-demands Resources Model

The balance between job-demands and the material and immaterial resources provided by the employer is essential in the Job-Demands Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). This research established an imbalance between the time that tasks take and the time assigned. Furthermore, a substantial part of the teachers do not possess enough immaterial sources in the field of didactics. On the other hand though, the execution of educational tasks such as teaching and tutoring, are experienced as a source of energy and inspiration.

6.2.5 Teacher's Concerns

The teacher's concerns theory (Fuller, 1974) describes and explains the professional development of teachers. This research confirms above theory. Starting teachers are initially concerned with forming relationships with students, self-maintenance and the development of teaching skills. Team leaders are aware and are willing to take the personal development into account when assigning tasks. However, circumstances force them to assign tasks that are not in line with the individual developmental stage of the teacher, such as coordination, thesis tutoring and membership of boards such as the Examination Board. In sum, many new teachers do not get the opportunity to develop their career in a natural way. This has a negative impact on their professional well-being.

6.3 Some Methodological Remarks

The three studies discussed in this paper could be labelled as instances of ongoing action research or practitioners research by the HR department of the university. In two studies, qualitative research was conducted, the other study can be labelled as quantitative research. The differences in approach were a result of the HR department's need at that time. The diversity of outcomes and the richness of qualitative and quantitative research were by the practitioner researcher regarded as a benefit by the practitioner researchers. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data provide the HR department with on the one hand rich, personal, emotional, endured first-hand accounts. Quantitative research on the other hand provides the management with an overview how widespread certain experiences are. This combination of research approaches provides the management of the university and the HR department insights that enable them to take measures.

As a result of the first research (Reinders & Martens, 2020) the onboarding was improved. An example of an improvement is the app that was developed for communication. The second research (De Jong, Korfage & Wind, 2021) showed that the improvements paid off. In general, newly hired teachers were happy with the onboarding period. They had experienced a warm welcome and a good induction into the new organisation. The third research project (De Jong, Korfage & Spoelstra, during the period of take-off, shows a different picture. The initial satisfaction has subsided; people are struggling with several aspects of teaching and functioning in an institution for higher education. This phenomenon, high levels of employee satisfaction during the initial stage of a new job, lowered levels after a while, has been coined as the honeymoon-hangover effect (Boswell et al., 2009; Boswell, Boudreau & Tichy, 2005). Nevertheless, a good onboarding period is crucial, since in the long term employee satisfaction levels and employee engagement will remain substantially higher of people who experienced a good period of onboarding and induction (Boswell et al., 2009).

6.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

One of the features of practitioners' research is that studies do not always meet all generally accepted standards. Some of the studies described in this paper, lack to some extent academic rigour. Specifically the selection of interviewees in the first study is to a certain degree decided by coincidence and convenience. Nevertheless, this study was assessed by policy makers as acceptable and a new onboarding policy was based upon it. The second study shows, that this new onboarding policy paid off.

The three studies can be regarded as three lenses, each with some scratches. Each lens may give a slightly distorted picture; however, the three studies combined provide a clear image of onboarding practices.

The theoretical framework of the paper is based upon four generally accepted theories in the field of HR research, the self-determination theory, the motivation-hygiene theory, the leader autonomy support theory, the job demands-resources theory. The fifth theory, the teachers' concerns theory has appeared to be an appropriate instrument to characterise and explain teachers' development. Still, this approach has not been widely applied. It is advised that more researchers and practitioners gain experience with this tool in order to validate the teachers' concerns theory.

Furthermore, the concept of professional well-being, compared to more current concepts such as employee satisfaction and employee happiness, deserves further research, not in the least because it makes the employees less an object of HR-practices, but gives them agency.

6.5 Recommendations

The research on the start of teachers' careers in higher education has led to insights institutions can use to their advance.

Firstly, institutions for higher education should pay attention to the periods of onboarding and take-off within the framework of their employee journey. The onboarding should contain a thorough induction in the organisation and training of dealing with systems. Besides that, teachers must get thorough initial educational training. In addition, organisations should be aware of the honeymoon-hangover effect.

Secondly, team leaders must specifically pay attention to supporting teachers in the stage of onboarding and take-off. They must be aware of the developmental stages in learning the trade and must realise that insecurities are part of it.

Thirdly, teams should employ a welcoming approach to newly hired colleagues. The new colleagues should be appreciated for their fresh views and their knowledge.

7. Summarising

In this paper, the case of NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences was presented. This institution for higher education hired 288 teachers within a time frame of two years. Research was conducted in order to track how this population went through the stages of onboarding and take-off. The results of research were used to improve procedures, which led to better onboarding practices. Nevertheless, in the take-off stage, the university should offer the teachers more support. Team leaders have a crucial role in motivating and supporting newly hired teachers, which will result in higher levels of professional well-being and in the end higher employee retention levels.

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Appendix I. Consultancy Bureaus Using ‘Employee Journey’

Dutch consultancy agencies using the concept of the ‘employee journey’

Oracle netsuite

Netsuite.com

HR Academy

Hrpraktijk.nl

Amplix

Amplix.com

Human navigator

Humannavigator.org

Frankwatching

Frankwatching.com

Asession

Asession.com

Analitiqs

Analitiqs.com

Kollektif Media

Kollektif.nl

Non-Dutch agencies using the concept of the ‘employee journey’

Cleary

Gocleary.com

United States of America

Introdus

Introdusapp.com

Denmark

i-Realise

i-Realise.co.uk

United Kingdom

Oak Engage
Oak.com
United Kingdom

Control Hippo
Controlhippo.com
United Kingdom

Blink
Joinblink.com
United States of America

Zavvy
Zavvy.io
Germany

Semos Cloud
Semoscloud.com
United States of America

HR Trend Institute
Hrtrendinstitute.com
United Kingdom

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