



Confederation
of School Trusts

The role of trusts as talent architects: creating schools as great places to work

Part of the CST 'A Bridge to the Future' series



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CST is the national organisation and sector body for academy and multi-academy trusts - advocating for, connecting and supporting executive and governance leaders in School Trusts.

We are a charitable company, registered with the Charity Commission. Our charitable purpose, as set out in our Articles of Association, is "the advancement of education for public benefit."

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We are strictly apolitical. We work with the government of the day, political parties and politicians across the spectrum to advance education for public benefit.

CST's mission is to build an excellent education system in England, with every school part of a strong and sustainable group in which every child is a powerful learner and adults learn and develop together as teachers and leaders.

Our vision is a system which holds trust on behalf of children.

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About the author

Mandy Coalter is the Founder of Talent Architects and the author of 'Talent Architects: how to make your school a great place to work'.

She is the former Director of People at United Learning. She is a Trustee of the Diocese of Coventry Multi Academy Trust and the National Teaching Awards Trust. She is the Chair of the Large Academy Trust HR Director network. Mandy is the founder and leader of the Talent Architects 'HR Influencers Programme' aimed at developing senior HR professional capacity across Trusts.



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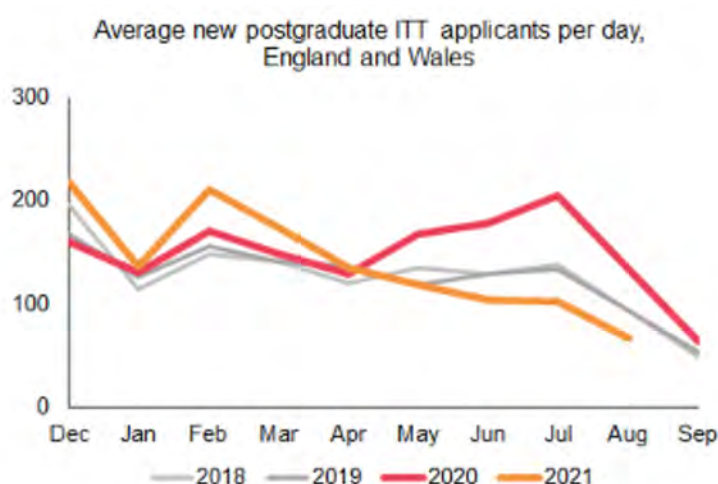


This paper sets out the vital role of Trusts as employers and how to build sustainable People Strategies in our sector to deliver education for the public benefit. It argues that policy makers need to engage more with Trusts as employers and better connect with the HR profession. The paper argues firmly that Trusts themselves are the key enablers of quality people management in our sector and will play a vital role in building a sustainable education workforce.

The challenges we face

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a challenge like no other and Trusts have risen to this challenge. One of the few benefits of the pandemic has been the boost to Initial Teacher Training (ITT) recruitment alongside a slowdown in turnover of staff in our schools. Many predicted that this would be short term in nature and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

has confirmed this is the case with a worrying recent swift downturn in ITT recruitment. In a tweet on 1st September this year, Jack Worth from NFER posted this data and states that *"this ITT cycle has gone from very good to poor really, really quickly. It raises important questions about next year and beyond."*



This is not a surprise and NFER have been signalling warnings for some months. As the economy bounces back many of us expected that it would lead to a downturn in the boost to teacher recruitment. This is the normal cycle of things following a recession. It is worrying however that early signs are that application rates are below pre-covid levels. Many Trusts and schools are reporting that teacher turnover rates are starting to climb again as staff begin to feel more confident about moving schools or even sectors.

The recruitment and retention crisis we faced pre-covid is still very much a live issue. The reprieve was limited due to the short-term nature of the hit to the economy. We are still facing that same challenge of how do we build a sustainable and long-term talent pipeline for our schools? Arguably this challenge has become even more acute as the risk has spread from classroom teachers to leadership – predictions of headteacher churn post pandemic have yet to bear fruition but some recent surveys of leaders indicate we should be very concerned about the pipeline.

The role of policy makers

Policy makers have a clear role to play in influencing recruitment and retention nationally. They can raise the status of the profession, attract quality people, and create frameworks that help staff feel valued and supported.

For example, decisions on teachers' pay are crucial to attracting talent to the profession. The DfE recruitment and retention strategy has some good initiatives. The new Early Career Framework is much needed and welcome. Efforts to pioneer flexible working across schools through Ambassador schools and a national training programme are laudable. The DfE wellbeing charter provides an excellent blueprint for schools.

However there continues to be some significant improvements needed in policy formulation, design, and implementation. Policy makers often ignore the role of Trusts as the employer of school staff, designing their interventions for individual maintained schools and a model of governance that is at odds with the role of the Trust Board. Given the DfE has a clearly stated ambition that all schools should be ultimately part of an Academy Trust this needs to shift rapidly. CST is making

a big difference here as the representative of Trusts as employers, and has been incredibly influential, for example throughout the pandemic, in raising at national level key employment challenges. This role needs to enhance and strengthen as we move forward.

Policy makers also tend to bypass the growing professional HR community in Trusts – the very people working locally on people strategy and interventions and who understand how to build workforce capability. There have been some improvements in this area but there is still a long way to go. It is a very different context to other areas of policy such as Health which has senior HR expertise at the heart of national employment policy development. The HR community in our sector has been very proactive at building this bridge and there are now some powerful networks collaborating with CST to influence this - including the Large Academy Trust HR Directors network.



The role of Trusts

Whilst policy makers have an important role to play the evidence tells us that most of the solutions to teacher recruitment and retention are in the hands of Trust and school leaders. Edurio is an organisation that surveys parents, pupils, and staff. In 2019 they published their [Improving Staff Retention in Academies](#) report having by that time surveyed over 10,000 people working in over 300 Academies across the country. Of concern was the finding that 46% of teachers and 45% of middle leaders had considered resigning in the previous three months. The extent of the risk of staff resigning was a school-by-school issue ranging from 0% in some schools to a staggering 84% in others. Crucially, leadership dynamics in the school showed the strongest correlation with staff risk of resigning. This makes the strong case for Trusts and schools to focus on their own recruitment and retention or 'people' strategy as a key way to influence the national challenge.

The answer to the question 'Does your Trust have a written people strategy and plan?' is typically 'no.' Yet of course every Trust will have a written school improvement strategy or a written finance strategy. We have those because we know they matter and that we cannot leave pupil outcomes or financial control to chance. We also have those things because of course it is expected of us and we will be judged by their success.

Yet when it comes to our people, we often do leave matters to chance. Despite this, Boards generally do understand it is their people that are both the largest cost and the most important asset they have to impact pupil outcomes – people are at the very heart of our purpose as Trusts.



People Matter

People matter due to our need for talent and how crucial this is to improve schools and deliver for children. They also matter for Trusts that want to play a vital civic role in their local communities. Most school staff live locally, they mix with our communities, shop in the supermarkets, drink in the pubs and will have extensive social and economic networks in our local areas. They can be our greatest advocates or our worst detractors. This is particularly true of the many support staff that work in our schools that can often get forgotten with such a focus on teachers.

People also matter for Trusts to build sustainable infrastructures to lead change, improve schools and respond to crises such as the pandemic. All these things require capacity which in most cases means people. I was reminded of this recently listening to a [The Key podcast](#) with Sir John Coles, CEO of United Learning, the largest Academy group in the country. In this he described how scale had given the group capacity to deal with the challenges of the pandemic in an important way because they had the people resource, skills, and expertise to respond swiftly and support schools with difficult decisions.

There is a wonderful opportunity for Trusts to be at the vanguard of the school sector approach to impactful people strategy and indeed it is vital if we want to

be successful in our aims. In doing this we need to acknowledge that historically schools have not always been the most modern of employers. Working practices can seem outdated to those coming into the sector, with a lack of flexible working, low autonomy and trust and high workload. We do not exist in a vacuum; we are competing in the modern labour market and trends are changing fast all the time. Talented people expect the organisations they work for to value them, to encourage diversity, to offer flexibility, to trust them, to help them develop their career and to give them a sense of purpose. This is the case across all demographics whether young people entering the labour market for the first time or career changers coming from industry. They will take their talent elsewhere if these are lacking.

The pandemic has catapulted people issues right up the agenda across many businesses and organisations. Health and safety, flexible working, and employee wellbeing have been prominent alongside a growing demand for more diverse and inclusive workplaces. The world of work is moving on at a fast pace and Trusts need to move onto the front foot to keep pace and truly be that 'employer of choice' so many say they want to be.

Building a People Strategy

The 4-pillar model in '[Talent Architects, how to make your school a great place to work](#)' provides a focus for a Trust developing its People Strategy. The model is based on research, evidence and over 25 years of experience of working with schools and across other sectors.



Leadership, Culture and Climate is the first pillar for a reason. As evidenced by the Edurio research, it is **the** most important factor in influencing if people want to stay in your Trust and schools. It remains the case that people tend to leave a boss rather than an organisation.

Systematically developing leaders, with a significant focus on their people leadership abilities in addition to domain specific knowledge, should be a crucial priority in every Trust People strategy.

Leadership culture matters across all the pillars. When it comes to staff wellbeing, for example, leaders play a vital role. Those Trusts with genuine commitment to staff wellbeing recognise this and ensure it is part of their DNA and culture. They avoid wellbeing gimmicks and fads. As **Simon Sinek** says in his wonderful book **Leaders Eat Last**:

“There is a pattern that exists in the organisations that achieve the greatest success...the one’s with the highest loyalty and lowest churn and the ability to weather any storm or challenge. These exceptional organisations all

have cultures in which the leaders provide cover from above and the people on the ground look out for each other. This is what it means to work in a place in which the leaders prioritise the wellbeing of their people and in return their people give everything they’ve got to protect and advance the wellbeing of one another and the organisation.”

Alongside the ability to develop leaders at scale, Trusts also have a great opportunity to build frameworks across the other pillars that offer staff benefits and opportunities that could never be the case in a stand-alone school. Trusts that do this well for example, have clearly articulated career pathways that extend development opportunities across groups of schools whether in leadership, subject or phase expertise. They also use technology, consistent assessment, and resources to reduce burdens on teachers and impact workload. The NFER research '[Teacher Dynamics in Multi Academy Trusts](#)' found some good work in Trusts developing and deploying talent.

Professional expertise and capacity

When developing a fit for purpose strategy, an organisation needs leaders with the right knowledge, skills, and expertise. Trusts know this and will usually ensure that right at the outset they have credible senior leadership capacity to focus on school improvement and financial management. This is not the case for HR in the sector. The HR profession across the UK has moved on mountains since 20 years ago when it was often the bearer of 'tea and sympathy'. Successful commercial and public organisations today have HR teams at the heart of the organisation, responsible for building people strategy and capability that will enable the organisation to deliver its goals and ambitions. These organisations recognise they are nothing without great people and they need professional expertise to ensure they have the necessary people and talent.

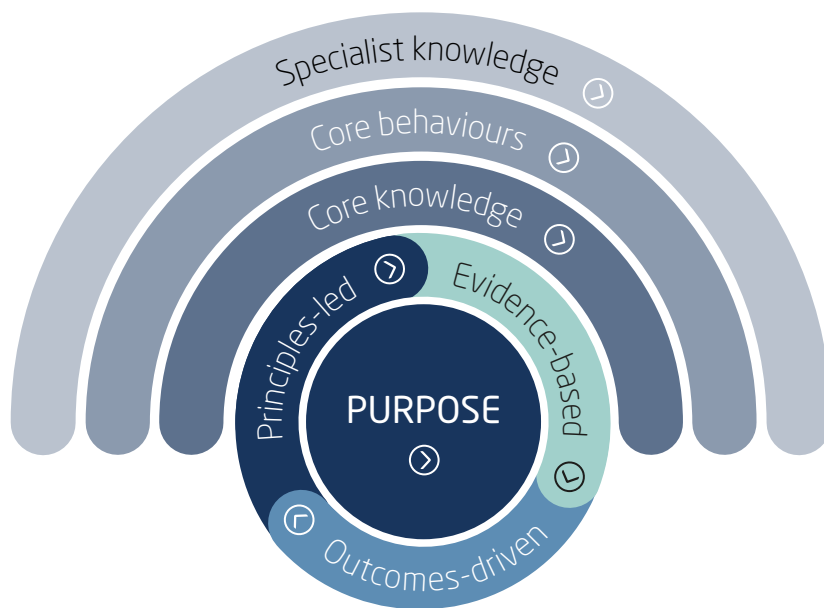
Across the school sector we still see much of HR time and focus reacting to problems and managing transactional activity such as pay and exits. Often this is inherited from local authority approaches. However, growing numbers of Trusts are recognising the need for change and are investing in a different type of HR than that we have previously seen in the school sector. Many large Trusts have talented HR Directors and strong teams; some smaller Trusts are seeking innovative ways to develop this as they grow. We still lack strong and effective HR expertise at scale across our sector and this is an important challenge to address if we want impactful people strategy.



HR needs to be integral at Board level with expertise around the table at both executive and non-executive levels. Every decision a Board makes will have people implications. HR needs to be relentlessly focused on improving outcomes for children and be forward-looking in what this means for the Trust's current and future workforce. They should be data driven, evidence-based and research-led, avoiding fads at the expense of what we know works. They should be developing policies, practice and frameworks that enable a Trust to recruit and retain the very best.

They should be flexible and agile to manage change, never more so evidenced than during the pandemic which has been such a significant 'people' crisis.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the professional body for HR has created a new professional roadmap which is a useful tool for developing a strong HR function. This map sets the international benchmark for the people profession.



We need to bring in HR talent from outside our sector and develop that within and continue to build strong networks and voice for HR.

Conclusion

As we emerge from the pandemic, the need to build strong and sustainable people strategies across our Trusts remains more important than ever.

Policy makers need to engage with Trusts as employers on strategic planning and ensure they recognise the growing professional voice of the HR community.

Trusts themselves as employers need to take control of this agenda, build, and deliver impactful people strategies. Boards need to oversee this and ensure there is credible HR expertise in the Trust that is focused on purpose and outcomes.

