

RESEARCH ARTICLE (ORIGINAL) 

Team Building as a Strategy for Retaining Health Professionals: A Descriptive Correlational Study

Formação de Equipas enquanto Estratégia de Retenção para Profissionais de Saúde: Um Estudo Descritivo-Correlacional

Formación de Equipos como Estrategia de Retención para Profesionales de la Salud: Un Estudio Descriptivo-Correlacional

Sandra Galamba¹
 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1013-6257>
Raquel Mendes Cerdeira²
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5599-663X>
Cátia Vicente³
 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3796-195X>
Carla Pinto¹
 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3506-7536>
Ana Filipa Poeira⁴
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9924-7526>

¹ Local Health Unit of São José, Neurosciences, Stroke Unit, Lisbon, Portugal

² Local Health Unit of Almada-Seixal, Personalized Health Care Unit of Amora, Setúbal, Portugal

³ Local Health Unit of São José, Curry Cabral Hospital, Emergency and Intensive Care, Multipurpose Intensive Care Unit, Lisbon, Portugal

⁴ Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal, School of Health, Setúbal, Portugal

Corresponding author

Raquel Mendes Cerdeira

Email: raquelmcerdeira@gmail.com

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Abstract

Background: There is a global shortage of healthcare professionals, making their retention urgently needed to ensure effective healthcare coverage. External turnover among healthcare professionals constitutes a significant challenge with potential consequences for organizations, patients, and professionals.

Objective: To verify whether participation in a team training program is associated with the turnover intention of healthcare professionals in a healthcare team.

Methodology: A quantitative exploratory study was carried out. Thirty-four healthcare professionals took part in a structured teambuilding program to explore its association with their turnover intention.

Results: An association was found between participation in the team training program and the turnover intention of healthcare professionals. According to participants, the *escape room* activity was perceived as the most influential, while monthly meetings contributed the least.

Conclusion: Healthcare professionals who participated in teambuilding activities reported a lower turnover intention.

Keywords: leadership; organizational culture; personnel turnover; health personnel

Resumo

Enquadramento: A escassez global de profissionais de saúde torna emergente a sua retenção para garantir uma cobertura de saúde eficaz. A rotatividade externa dos profissionais de saúde constitui um desafio, com potenciais consequências para as organizações, os utentes e os próprios profissionais.

Objetivo: Verificar se a participação num programa de formação de equipas está associada com a intenção de rotatividade dos profissionais de saúde de uma equipa de saúde.

Metodologia: Foi realizada uma investigação quantitativa exploratória, descritiva e correlacional. Trinta e quatro profissionais de saúde participaram num programa estruturado de formação de equipas para explorar a sua associação com a intenção de rotatividade dos profissionais.

Resultados: Verificou-se uma associação entre a participação no programa de formação de equipas e a intenção de rotatividade dos profissionais de saúde. A atividade *escape room* foi a percebida como a mais influente, enquanto as reuniões mensais foram as que menos contribuíram segundo a perceção dos participantes.

Conclusão: Os profissionais de saúde que participam em atividades de formação de equipas descreveram menor intenção de rotatividade.

Palavras-chave: liderança; cultura organizacional; reorganização de recursos humanos; profissionais de saúde

Resumen

Marco contextual: La escasez mundial de profesionales sanitarios hace que su retención sea esencial para garantizar una cobertura sanitaria eficaz. La rotación externa de los profesionales sanitarios es un reto, con posibles consecuencias para las organizaciones, los usuarios y los propios profesionales.

Objetivo: Comprobar si la participación en un programa de formación de equipos se asocia con la intención de rotación de los profesionales sanitarios en un equipo sanitario.

Metodología: Se llevó a cabo una investigación cuantitativa exploratoria, descriptiva y correlacional. Treinta y cuatro profesionales sanitarios participaron en un programa estructurado de formación de equipos para explorar su asociación con la intención de rotación del personal.

Resultados: Se observó una asociación entre la participación en el programa de formación de equipos y la intención de rotación de los profesionales sanitarios. La actividad de *escape room* se percibió como la más influyente, mientras que las reuniones mensuales fueron las que menos contribuyeron, según la percepción de los participantes.

Conclusión: Los profesionales sanitarios que participan en actividades de formación de equipos describen una menor intención de rotación.

Palabras clave: liderazgo; cultura organizacional; reorganización del personal; personal de salud



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Introduction

The relationship between the availability of human resources in health and universal health coverage is critical, as demonstrated by the Global Burden of Disease study, which highlights the urgency of global strategies to address the shortage of physicians, nurses, and midwives (Hakenstad et al., 2022). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) warns that nurse turnover is a significant challenge with profound implications for health organizations, patients, and professionals. Turnover contributes to the fragmentation of team cohesion, promotes a stressful environment (Yi et al., 2024), and increases conflict and dissatisfaction among remaining professionals (Lu et al., 2019). Its analysis from a management perspective becomes relevant, as reducing turnover can contribute to professional competence and organizational development. In addition to the high cost to the organization, turnover can also affect the quality of health care (Hayes et al., 2012; WHO, 2020; Ren et al., 2024; Tang & Hudson, 2019). Despite its importance, evidence of the effectiveness of team-building activities in reducing turnover intentions among health professionals is still limited. Therefore, this study aims to examine whether participation in a team-building program is associated with turnover intentions of health professionals in a multidisciplinary team of a health unit.

Background

The variability of the turnover rates can be problematic, and authors such as Poon et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of understanding this variability as a reflection of structural and cultural issues that can be addressed as effective strategies. The definition of turnover is often inconsistent and varies between studies, making direct comparisons difficult. As highlighted by D'Alessandro-Lowe et al. (2024), there are variations in the definitions and measurement methods used to assess turnover intentions among health professionals.

Simply put, turnover is a movement in the labor market characterized by the entry and exit of individuals from a given organization that make up that market (Anselmi et al., 1997). When an organization has a high turnover rate, it is usually a sign of a negative work environment (Poon et al., 2022). Therefore, it is imperative that organizations not only emphasize recruitment, but also strategically invest in retention. Turnover of health professionals is a growing concern and a central issue influenced by various factors that make teams unstable, worn out, and exhausted, thus compromising the quality of care provided (Hayes et al., 2012). To address this challenge, it is essential to implement dynamic and motivating strategies aimed at increasing the satisfaction of these professionals at work (Cantarelli et al., 2023), improving communication (Duru & Hammoud, 2022), and strengthening interpersonal relationships (Zhang et al., 2022). Teams with favorable working conditions can provide excellent care and achieve high levels of job satisfaction (WHO, 2007a).

Team building is defined as the process of bringing together the right people and guiding them to work together toward a common goal (WHO, 2007b). According to Andrade (2011), it is a “learning activity through which we can review the interaction between team members, identify strengths and weaknesses so that we can correct and adjust them” (p. 24). In this way, fostering team spirit not only improves team effectiveness and satisfaction but also directly reduces turnover intentions and strengthens both teams and organizations. Research shows that teamwork benefits job satisfaction and promotes employee well-being and quality of care (Rosen et al., 2018; Ruotsalainen et al., 2023). Team-building activities are essential to improving performance, leveraging individual and collective strengths, and solving problems (Rosen et al., 2018). According to Byron et al. (2022), creativity and innovation enable professionals to develop and implement effective solutions in organizations. In addition, autonomy and professional recognition play an important role in increasing organizational commitment and reducing the likelihood that professionals will consider leaving the health sector (Mauritius et al., 2017; Poeira et al., 2019).

Research question

What is the association between participation in a team-building program and the turnover intention of health professionals of a multidisciplinary team in a health unit?

Methodology

A quantitative, descriptive, and correlational study was conducted. The data were collected using a printed questionnaire, which was administered in two stages. The first stage took place between January and April 2022, and the second in March 2023, coinciding with the end of the program. Between the two collection periods, the activity plan was developed and implemented.

A hospital unit was selected to implement the team-building activity plan, including all the professionals in that unit. The sample consisted of 34 health professionals from an intermediate care unit in a central hospital in Lisbon, Portugal, including all the team members from the selected unit. The inclusion criteria were: 1) health professionals working in the unit full- or part-time; 2) health professionals with an employment contract at the institution. We describe the data collection instrument applied before the team-building activities, the activity plan developed, and, finally, the data collection instrument used to examine the association between participation in the team-building program and the health professionals' turnover intention.

Data collection: first moment

The questionnaire developed by Poeira et al. (2019) was used to measure external turnover factors and the propensity for future turnover among nurses in Portugal.



Items 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23 of the questionnaire were selected for this study to assess the frequency with which professionals felt like practicing in a country other than Portugal, leaving the profession, or choosing the same profession again if they had the opportunity to return to the beginning. They also assessed their level of satisfaction with their profession and the organization in which they worked. These questions used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *Never* (1) to *Always* (5), or from *Not at all satisfied* (1) to *Completely satisfied* (5). In addition, item 24 was selected, which addresses how professionals value the characteristics of a desired working environment. The variable “importance attributed to the characteristics of the work environment” is made up of 24 items, which are organized around eight dimensions or components identified by exploratory factor analysis. The analysis was carried out after verifying the adequacy of the sample, with a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index of 0.743 and a Bartlett’s test of sphericity with a value of 922.129 ($p = 0.000$). The dimensions identified were Work Organization and Conditions Offered; Work Hours and Workload; Salary and Advancement; Professional Growth; Human Relations; Autonomy and Professional Recognition; Geographical Proximity to Family/Friends; and Contractual Stability (Poeira et al., 2019). In this study, the indications of the original scale were followed. The questionnaire also had a second part with sociodemographic characterization questions.

Intervention: team-building activity plan

Both the indoor activities like the “Teamwork” workshop and the outdoor activities were designed to improve teamwork, identify team strengths and weaknesses, promote an environment of job satisfaction, strengthen the team, and reduce conflict.

Data collection: second moment

Seven post-intervention questions were selected to examine the association between participation in the team-building program and the turnover intentions of health professionals. The second instrument used in this study was constructed on a 5-point scale from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data using the percentage method.

Data analysis

Data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics software, version 25.0. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the participants, their intention to leave the profession and emigrate, their regrets about their choice of profession, their satisfaction with the profession and the organization, and the importance attributed to the characteristics of the work environment in which the professional would like to be inserted. Given the sample size and after confirming that the dependent variables did not have a normal distribution as indicated by the Shapiro-Wilk test ($p < 0.05$), it was determined that non-parametric tests would be used to examine the relationship between the professional factors and the dependent variables. Significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

The study was approved by the hospital’s Ethics Committee (no. 1103/2021) and was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki’s ethical principles. Authorization was obtained from the author of the scale used in this study. Participants gave written informed consent to participate in this study.

Results

The sample consisted of 26 (76.5%) women and 8 (23.5%) men. Their ages ranged from 22 to 61 years, with 37.9% ($n = 11$) aged 39 or younger and 51.8% ($n = 15$) aged between 40 and 49 years. Most were nurses ($n = 22$; 64.7%), followed by six physicians (17.6%), three nursing assistants (8.8%), and three from another professional category (8.8%) who are not exclusively assigned to the unit, namely cardiopneumology technicians and administrative assistants. The majority of the team has extensive professional experience, with 25 (73.5%) professionals having worked for more than 10 years. Most of them have worked in the organization for more than 10 years ($n = 13$; 38.2%). We found that 49.9% of the participants ($n = 17$) had wanted to leave their profession at some point and more than 50% ($n = 24$) would choose a different profession if they had the opportunity to go back to the beginning. These results are consistent with the level of job satisfaction expressed, with only one (2.95) participant in the study claiming to be completely satisfied with their work and the organization. With regard to the differences between the groups defined by years of nursing experience in relation to the eight dimensions of the importance attributed to the characteristics of the work environment, analyzed using the Kruskal-Wallis test, no statistically significant differences were found in any of the dimensions ($p > 0.05$). However, professionals with more than 20 years’ experience are the ones who most value the different dimensions related to the work environment, namely Work Organization and Conditions Offered, Work Hours and Workload, Salary and Advancement, Professional Growth, Autonomy and Professional Recognition, Geographical Proximity to Family/Friends, Contractual Stability. Only the Human Relations dimension is an exception, with professionals with less seniority valuing this variable in the work environment.

The variable “intention to emigrate” was significantly different between the groups ($p = .024$). Multiple comparisons (post-hoc tests) between the three groups were performed using the Bonferroni correction. The results indicate a statistically significant difference between professionals with more than 20 years of nursing experience and those with less than or equal to 10 years of nursing experience ($p < 0.05$). However, the differences were not statistically significant between professionals with more than 20 years and those with 11 to 20 years, and between professionals with 11 to 20 years and those with less than or equal to 10 years ($p > 0.05$). The other dependent variables did not show significant differences ($p > 0.05$). The importance attributed to the different characteristics

of the work environment did not differ between nurses who had worked more or less time in the organization where the study was conducted. On the other hand, the variables “intention to leave the profession” ($p = 0.011$) and “satisfaction with the profession” ($p = 0.003$) showed differences between the groups. Health professionals with 5 years or less in the organization showed greater intention to leave the profession and also less satisfaction with the profession. There were no differences between the groups on any of the other dependent variables ($p > 0.05$).

After the team-building program, participants were asked about their perceptions of the activities conducted and their turnover intentions. When asked if participating in the team-building program had a positive effect on turnover intention, 44.1% of participants agreed and 47.1% strongly agreed, indicating a largely positive perception. When asked if team-building programs should be used more frequently in health organizations, the response was virtually unanimous: 85.3% strongly agreed and the remaining 14.7% agreed. The question “Do internal monthly meetings contribute to reducing your turnover intention?” yielded less expressive results, with 44.1% of participants maintaining a neutral position, 38.2% agreeing, and only 17.6% strongly agreeing. On the other hand, the “Teamwork” indoor workshop was rated more favorably. When asked, “Did the ‘Teamwork’ indoor workshop help reduce your turnover intention?”, 58.8% of participants agreed and 32.4% strongly agreed. Among the specific activities, the escape room stood out as the highest-rated activity. When asked, “Did the indoor escape room activity help reduce your turnover intention?”, 97.1% of participants strongly agreed, demonstrating a very positive perception of the activity. When asked, “Did the outdoor treasure game activity help reduce your turnover intention?”, 50% of participants agreed and 50% strongly agreed. Finally, when asked, “Did outdoor geocaching help reduce your turnover intention?”, 79.4% strongly agreed and 20.6% agreed. Overall, it was found that regardless of professional or sociological characteristics, the team-building activities conducted were perceived as positive in relation to the turnover intentions of these healthcare professionals.

Discussion

The results of this study reinforce the importance of team-building activities as a potential strategy to promote the retention of health professionals in organizations. These findings highlight the relevance of these initiatives, especially in a context where factors such as seniority and professional experience have a significant impact on turnover intentions. Dimensions such as work organization, workload, and contractual stability were more highly valued among health professionals with more than 20 years of experience. This reflects a greater concern for job security and stability. On the other hand, professionals with less professional experience prioritized human relationships and showed a greater willingness to emigrate, highlighting the need for interventions to

strengthen interpersonal bonds and organizational commitment. Studies show a relationship between age and years of professional experience and turnover intentions (Hashish, 2017). Labrague et al. (2018) cite several studies that show age, gender, academic degree, professional experience, and seniority as factors affecting organizational commitment. From the perspective of Neves et al. (2018), turnover results from the combined influence of several factors, including personal characteristics. The team-building activities conducted in this study were well received by the participants, especially the escape room. This type of activity promotes team cohesion and collaboration, reinforcing the relevance of practical and dynamic interventions, as they have the potential to improve perceptions of organizational support, participation in decision-making, and professional autonomy, factors that are widely associated with greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Brunetto et al., 2013; Labrague et al., 2019). On the other hand, monthly internal meetings had less impact, suggesting that adjustments are needed to align these activities with professionals’ expectations and optimize their benefits. Thus, teamwork leads to social reciprocity and benefits the organization, as a team of professionals is more productive than a single professional and has a positive impact at the organizational level (Brunetto et al., 2013). Several studies reinforce the importance of providing strategies that promote the retention of health professionals and increase their adherence to organizational goals (Cantarelli et al., 2023; Duru & Hammoud, 2022; Tang & Hudson, 2019). The less time a member stays with the organization, the more it costs the institution, doubling the cost of the recruitment process and ultimately having undesirable effects on the quality and quantity of services provided (Waldman et al., 2020).

The limitations of the study include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was still present in 2021 and has significantly affected health organizations. These conditions contributed to slow study conduct, data collection, and team-building activities. In addition, shift work created challenges in scheduling times to administer the questionnaires and conduct the activities. Nevertheless, the extension of the data collection period made it possible to adjust the application times, respecting the availability of the participants, without compromising the functioning of the teams. Furthermore, as this was not a funded project, the costs of the team-building activities were borne by the health professionals themselves, which resulted in lower participation, highlighting the need to promote greater equity in this type of initiative.

Conclusion

It is important for health organizations to regularly assess the turnover intentions of their professionals. The results of this study suggest that healthcare professionals perceive team-building activities as a strategy to reduce turnover intentions. Retaining integrated and experienced professionals is essential for organizations, as their departure

implies a loss of knowledge and experience. Team building is proving to be a promising approach that contributes to cohesion among professionals. However, to maximize its benefits, it is important to extend these activities to the entire organization, including different teams and professional categories. A comprehensive and continuous view of turnover will enable healthcare organizations to identify its causes, correct weaknesses, and develop human resource management policies. In a scenario characterized by a shortage of healthcare professionals, creating attractive working conditions and promoting models of cooperation and teamwork not only strengthens organizations, but also improves the quality of care provided and the satisfaction of professionals.

Author contributions

Galamba, S., Cerdeira, R. M., Vicente, C., Pinto, C., Poeira, A. F.

Conceptualization: Galamba, S., Cerdeira, R. M., Vicente, C., Pinto, C., Poeira, A. F.

Data curation: Poeira, A. F.

Formal analysis: Galamba, S., Cerdeira, R. M., Vicente, C., Pinto, C., Poeira, A. F.

Investigation: Galamba, S., Cerdeira, R. M., Vicente, C., Pinto, C., Poeira, A. F.

Methodology: Cerdeira, R. M., Poeira, A. F.

Project administration: Galamba, S., Cerdeira, R. M., Vicente, C., Pinto, C., Poeira, A. F.

Resources: Galamba, S., Cerdeira, R. M., Vicente, C., Pinto, C.,

Software: Cerdeira, R. M., Poeira, A. F.

Supervision: Galamba, S., Cerdeira, R. M., Vicente, C., Pinto, C., Poeira, A. F.

Validation: Galamba, S., Cerdeira, R. M., Vicente, C., Pinto, C., Poeira, A. F.

Visualization: Galamba, S., Cerdeira, R. M., Pinto, C., Poeira, A. F.

Writing – original draft: Cerdeira, R. M., Vicente, C., Pinto, C., Poeira, A. F.

Writing – review and editing: Cerdeira, R. M., Poeira, A. F.

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