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Sustainable Talent Pipelines and Person-Organisation Fit: Strategic Insights from UK Graduates

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Strategic Insights from UK Graduates

Abstract

Purpose: Drawing on a framework of Person-Organisation Fit (POF) theory, this paper aims to understand how organisations can establish and maintain sustainable early-career talent pipelines. Research question one asks, 'How do graduates feel that organisations can attract early-career talent?'. Research question two asks, 'What can employers learn from graduate perspectives about the retention of early-career talent?

Design/methodology/approach: Twenty-eight graduates from UK universities participated in semi-structured interviews in early 2022. Cohort one was composed of 15 individuals who graduated in 2008. Cohort two was composed of 13 individuals who graduated in 2020.

Findings: The findings identified two themes associated with attracting early-career talent: 'Company Culture' and 'Supply & Demand'. However, 2020 graduates prioritised the job role and job security, whereas 2008 graduates prioritised job location and commute duration. Three additional themes were related to the retention of early-career talent: 'Career Progression', 'Health & Well-being', and 'Remuneration'. Findings also highlighted how POF could evolve over time, whereby retention can be beneficial or detrimental to either party.

Originality: The study extends POF research and bridges the shared sustainability themes of 'person', 'context', and 'time' from vocational behaviour and HRM literature streams.

Practical Implications: The study identifies pragmatic approaches to attracting and retaining early-career talent and understanding how graduates' views on POF evolve over time.

Keywords: Person-Organisation Fit, Sustainability, Strategic HRM, Talent Management, Early-Career, Attraction, Retention.

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Introduction

Employee attraction and retention have been 'hot topics' within the Human Resource Management (HRM) literature for several decades (Drucker, 1999). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented organisational disruption leading to elevated levels of innovation and change (Krammer, 2021). Organisations have thus sought to expand their focus on developing Early-Career Talent (ECT) pipelines, with graduate job vacancies in 2022 around twenty per cent higher than before the pandemic (Institute of Student Employers, 2022a). Yet, based on insights from one hundred and fifty-nine employers in the UK, fifty-four per cent are struggling to attract graduate candidates to fill open roles, and sixty-eight per cent are struggling to attract diverse graduate talent (The Careers 2032 Project, 2022). Organisations also struggle to differentiate themselves from competitors to attract candidates and develop diverse ECT pipelines (Anderson and Tomlinson, 2021).

The pandemic also catalysed individuals to seek purpose and meaning in their work and a desire to flourish in all aspects of their lives (Afshari, 2021). Additional emphasis was placed on a desire for 'Good Work' incorporating dimensions of (i) pay and benefits, (ii) contracts, (iii) work-life balance, (iv) job design and the nature of work, (v) relationships at work, (vi) employee voice, and (vii) health and wellbeing (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2022, pp.3-4). The outcome was that 2021/22 saw the lowest graduate retention rates of seventy-one to seventy-two per cent after three years since records began in 2011 based on a sample of one hundred and seven employers in the UK (Institute of Student Employers, 2022b). The same report found that thirty-three per cent of organisations felt that the COVID-19 pandemic increased turnover in ECT, and sixty-three per cent have implemented initiatives to improve retention. The view is supported by a separate survey based on insights from one hundred and fifty-nine employers in the UK that seventy-one per cent are concerned about the retention of ECT and places it as the top challenge for the next decade (The Careers 2032

Project, 2022). However, it is important to mention that the Institute of Student Employers relies on data from a limited number of companies (107 clean responses in their 2022 survey), whilst Handshake, who are part of The Careers 2032 Project, is interested in using the data to identify gaps in recruitment to sell their services.

Moreover, accounting for inflation, 2020 graduates are paid less than graduates were in 2008, despite dramatic increases in the cost of university tuition fees, leaving forty per cent of graduates unhappy with their pay (Institute of Student Employers, 2022b). This should concern higher education institutions and organisations that rely on graduate talent since the perceived benefits versus costs of participation in higher education were already narrowing before the pandemic (Donald et al., 2018). Additionally, forty-four per cent of graduates left their job in 2021-2022 to pursue a different type of work or career, whilst forty per cent left due to the location and commute (Institute of Student Employers, 2022b).

The 'Great Resignation' departs from the traditional view in organisational behaviour research, whereby the decision to leave an organisation is framed as a 'strategy of last resort' (Follmer et al., 2018). In the context of early-career talent, 'Quiet Quitting' has become increasingly prevalent, whereby an employee works to the conditions of their contract rather than seeking to take on additional work or responsibilities (although the appropriateness of the term 'Quiet Quitting' remains up for debate). The prevalence of Quiet Quitting in early-career talent may reflect the highly agentic nature of the Great Resignation. For example, leaving a job requires resources to cushion the transition period until alternative employment is found. Additionally, specific roles or sectors represent precarious employment due to an oversupply of talent respective to the demand from employers, making it more difficult for individuals to act on their dissatisfaction.

However, the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting reflect the emerging view that Person-Environment Fit (PEF) changes over time (Vleugels et al., 2019). For example, PEF

research addresses how individuals and organisations assess each other via an attraction-selection-attrition process (Schneider, 1987). Establishing and maintaining PEF takes on increased significance for organisations and sectors where the demand for personnel exceeds the supply (Borg and Scott-Young, 2022). Yet, whilst the HRM literature acknowledges how employees can facilitate organisational learning practices (Afshari and Nasab, 2021), there is a paucity of research seeking to understand the lived experiences of graduates within organisations. Graduates' views become more significant by facilitating organisations to implement informed policies for the attraction and retention strategies of ECT management.

In response, this paper aims to understand how organisations can establish and maintain sustainable ECT pipelines. The author defines 'Early-Career Talent' (ECT) as an individual entering the workplace after completing an undergraduate or master's degree with less than fourteen years of professional work experience. The timeframe aligns with early-career (0-14 years), mid-career (15-29 years), and late-career (30-44 years) phases based on a typical forty-four-year career. The theoretical contribution comes from advancing PEF research via the lens of Personal-Organisation Fit (POF) and bridging the shared sustainability dimensions of 'person', 'context', and 'time' from the vocational behaviour literature (De Vos et al., 2020) and the HRM literature (Vleugels et al., 2019). The practical contribution comes from identifying pragmatic approaches to attracting and retaining ECT and understanding how graduates' views on POF evolve over time. This can help organisations protect their human capital investment (Rodrigues et al., 2020) and ensure alignment between an organisation's branding and the human resource development of their employees (Itam et al., 2020). It can also offer organisational sustainability via competitive advantage and financial performance due to increased productivity and reduced absenteeism, presenteeism, workplace burnout, and turnover of personnel (Donald et al., 2020; Ybema et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretical framework

The PEF theory captures the transactional interaction between an individual and an environment so that an individual can influence the environment, and the environment can affect the individual's motivation, behaviour, and health (Schneider, 1987). PEF theory can help frame employees' turnover intention and quit behaviours (Grobler and Rensburg, 2019). The application of PEF to a workplace setting is referred to as POF (Cable and Judge, 1996). Additionally, the continuous and dynamic process by which an individual seeks to achieve and maintain alignment with their work environment is termed 'work adjustment' (Dawis and Lofquist, 1976, p.55). A perceived lack of POF leads to a need for change either from the environmental side via organisational policies and cultures or from the employee side via adapting one's motivation and behaviours to the environment or leaving the organisation (Ostroff and Aumann, 2004).

Vocational behaviour theory refers to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as a career shock with either positive or negative outcomes for the individual employee (Akkermans et al., 2021). This study applies the notion of career shocks to the HRM literature via the conceptualisation of 'personnel shocks', which the author defines as "the impact of a chance event whereby organisations either lose or gain a competitive advantage due to the migration of talent between organisational environments". Subsequently, the decision to adopt POF as the theoretical framework is driven by the employers' need for sustainable ECT pipelines. The 'Great Resignation', 'Quiet Quitting', an increased desire for 'Good Work', and a 'Global War for Talent' offer opportunities to extend POF theory. Specifically, capturing employee-informed strategies enables organisations to modify their environments to overcome sustainability threats from global skill shortages via enhanced attraction and retention outcomes.

Attracting early-career talent

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a significant challenge for organisations attracting ECT (The Careers 2032 Project, 2022). Specifically, the need to pivot many aspects of the attraction and selection process from in-person to virtual offerings made it difficult for organisations to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Donald et al., 2021). Branding is one of the biggest challenges in recruiting ECT, as it often fails to address values, benefits, generational traits, and company culture (Berry, 2020). Yet, employer branding strongly influences a candidate's choice of an employer, with the relationship mediated by POF and moderated by social media (Tanwar and Kumar, 2019). Therefore, providing interactive features via web-based recruitment can enable prospective graduate applicants to assess POF and organisational attractiveness (Huang, 2022). Employer branding can thus be considered an antecedent to retention as it can lead to increased job satisfaction and organisational identification (Bharadwaj et al., 2022).

Another challenge is the shift from an employer-led to a candidate-led recruitment market as organisations face global talent shortages in specific industries (Borg and Scott-Young, 2022). Limited resources of personnel and budgets exacerbate this within graduate recruitment teams (Donald et al., 2021). Candidates who perceive the recruitment process as too long, who do not feel that the selection experience is representative of a work environment or company culture that aligns with their values, or who are left waiting for a decision at the end of the process are likely to opt for alternative offers of employment (Berry, 2020). The management of the onboarding process has also been shown to impact the decision-making process for candidates on whether to accept or reject a job offer from the organisation (Yamamura et al., 2010). This highlights how applicants establish their POF via the recruitment process, drawing on intrinsic and extrinsic factors as they seek career sustainability, leading to a competitive advantage for the employer (Jackson et al., 2022).

This study positions the attraction of ECT as an antecedent to employee retention by playing a vital role in establishing initial POF. Qualitative insights to capture the lived experiences of graduates can facilitate organisations to acquire talent in candidate-led markets, leading to the first research question:

Research Question One (RQ1): How do graduates feel that organisations can attract early-career talent?

Retaining early-career talent over time

Once an organisation establishes POF and hires ECT, the focus shifts to maintaining or enhancing POF via a talent retention strategy. Implementing this approach reduces recruitment and training costs whilst increasing productivity, competitive advantage, and profitability (Ybema et al., 2020). Moreover, the departure of a single employee can initiate a 'turnover contagion' whereby additional employees re-evaluate their fit and allegiance to the organisation leading to further loss of talent (Porter and Rigby, 2021). This is an example of social information processing theory capturing relationships between employees and the impact on job attitude and satisfaction (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). Thus, developing pragmatic strategies for talent retention via systematic human capital management remains a critical focus for organisations seeking to survive and thrive in evolving and global labour markets (Redondo et al., 2021). This is supported by The Careers 2032 Project (2022), which found that 71% of employers see retaining graduate talent as their biggest challenge in the next decade.

Sustainable careers and HRM theory capture three dimensions: person, context, and time (De Vos et al., 2020; Vleugels et al., 2019). POF theory stems from interactional psychology and can therefore be merged with sustainable careers and HRM theory by capturing interactions between an individual (an employee) and a context (an organisation) that plays out

over time. Moreover, POF is the most influential determinant of job satisfaction and employee

loyalty (Dhir et al., 2020). Key factors posited for the retention of ECT include opportunities

for rotation-based roles, continuous feedback, learning and development opportunities,

professional qualifications, and employee benefits beyond base salary (Zaharee et al., 2018).

In contrast, a lack of resource allocation in training, job design, and career management can be

barriers to POF, talent acquisition and retention for organisations (Borg and Scott-Young,

2022).

Yet, employee-informed strategies for talent retention drawing on a qualitative

approach remain sparse (e.g. Follmer et al., 2018). The vocational behaviour literature has

predominantly focused on quantitative methods addressing individual career agency (Baruch

and Sullivan, 2022), whilst recent endeavours to bridge the vocational behaviour and HRM

literature streams from a sustainability lens have adopted conceptual (e.g. Donald et al., 2020)

or quantitative (e.g. Ybema et al., 2020) approaches. Thus, this study seeks opportunities for

new strategies and approaches to talent management and retention by asking:

Research Question Two (RQ2): What can employers learn from graduate perspectives about

the retention of early-career talent?

Methods

Context and participants

The study focused on capturing the views and lived experiences of individuals who completed

their undergraduate degree studies in either 2008 or 2020 from any UK-based university. The

UK was chosen since it offered a national context to capture organisations' challenges in

attracting and retaining ECT (Institute of Student Employers, 2022a; 2022b; The Careers 2032

Project, 2022). The 2008 graduate cohort represented employees approximately thirteen-and-

a-half years since graduation, whilst the 2020 graduate cohort represented employees around

eighteen months since graduation who had started graduate roles in September 2020 or January 2021. This captured the beginning and end points of the early-career stage (0-14 years), as set out in the introduction.

These graduates also experienced global-level chance events in the final year of their degree course as they prepared for entry into the labour market (The Global Financial Crisis and The COVID-19 Pandemic). Furthermore, they have lived experience undertaking the university-to-work transition and working for organisations following graduation. The participants represented various sectors frequently entered by graduates from multiple degree programmes, including technology, marketing, finance, education, and administration. All participants could work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic 'working from home guidance' issued by the UK Government.

The study sample comprised 28 participants (15 Graduates from 2008 and 13 Graduates from 2020). Table I provides sample characteristics of the participants.

Insert Table I here

Category saturation occurred at 13 and 11 participants, although two additional participants were interviewed from each cohort to confirm that adding new participants did not generate new themes. These numbers reflect average sizes for thematic saturation of 11 plus 2 for confirmation (Guest et al., 2020).

Data collection and analysis

A post-positivist approach was adopted for this study, whereby semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 university graduates in January and February 2022. Ethical approval was obtained via the institutional review board. The identification of participants initially took place via professional networking platforms via a call for participants. Subsequently, a

stratified snowballing approach expanded the sample from the initial participants in the study, with earlier participants recommending other participants from their professional networks.

The interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted between 20 and 55 minutes. Example questions related to RQ1 and asked to both 2020 and 2008 graduates included 'What factors determined your choice of employer following graduation?' and 'What factors put you off applying to an organisation following graduation?'. Example questions related to RQ2 and asked solely to 2020 graduates included 'What are the reasons that would cause you to leave your employer?' and 'What can your current organisation do to keep you?'. Example questions related to RQ2 and asked solely to 2008 graduates included 'What were the reasons for leaving your first employer?' and 'What could the organisation have done to have kept you?'. The variance in questions concerning RQ2 facilitated an understanding of the evolution of POF over time.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were loaded into the software NVivo (Version 2022) to conduct thematic analysis because it offered transparency, flexibility, and the capability to code and retrieve data quickly. NVivo also allows the researcher to refer back to the context of specific codes, which helps to overcome concerns about reliability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researcher generated succinct labels and codes by immersing themselves in the dataset. These codes were subsequently revised and used to create initial themes, following an inductive approach whereby the researcher moved from a specific focus (code generation) to a general focus (theme generation). The themes were then reviewed and finalised, adhering to internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. This approach ensured that the six steps of thematic analysis offered by Gioia et al. (2013) were adhered to. The researcher subsequently returned to the participants to ensure that the themes represented their lived experiences. The approach ensured validity and overcame the limitation of a single researcher conducting the data collection and analysis.

Findings and Analysis

Thematic analysis report

Figure 1 provides a clear audit trail, enabling replication of the study, and promoting reliability. It evidences the final data structure (phase six) based on guidance and notation by Gioia et al. (2013, p.21).

Insert Figure 1 here

Additionally, there was consensus among 2008 and 2020 graduates that an employer would expect a person to stay with the organisation for two to three years for a graduate scheme role. The 2008 graduates suggested that movement occurred within the first three years or after six years. However, these figures included rotation elements of graduate schemes and internal moves within the same organisation. These timeframes map to the length of the graduate schemes (two to three years) or the length of a graduate scheme plus a similar length of time in an additional internal role (six years plus). Naturally, both 2008 and 2020 graduates reported shorter periods of employment for fixed-term contract roles, which tended to last for between three and eighteen months.

The findings and analysis are now addressed systematically across the five themes relating to RQ1 and RQ2. Each theme begins with a definition since defining the themes is a vital part of the transparency and replicability of thematic analysis (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019). Numbers in brackets identify the participant ID, graduation year, and gender (e.g. 1:2008:M).

RQ1: How do graduates feel that organisations can attract early-career talent?

Theme 1: Company culture

The theme 'Company Culture' is defined as the perceived way an organisation conducts itself and encompasses sub-themes of 'Brand Recognition & Reputation', 'Selection Process', and 'Work Environment'. There was no apparent difference in the findings from 2008 or 2020 graduates for this theme.

Graduates reported seeking _an open culture where companies share information with their employees, have good benefits, and have a collaborative approach rather than a top-down management style_ (23:2008:F). This captured the notion that individuals are _influenced by their surroundings and who they are around_ (22:2020:F). Graduates reported determining their perceived fit with an organisation based on _company or brand reputation_ (9:2008:M; 20:2020:M), _recognisable company names_ (15:2008:F; 11:2020:M) and _seeing investment in branding and being able to communicate that clearly in terms of "if you join us this is what you're going to get" – some organisations didn't do that_ (18:2020:M).

Participants also reported the selection process as helping to inform their POF. For example, 5:2008:F said that _more nurturing and upbeat employment teams with candidate-led processes enabled me to establish culture and personality to determine if I wanted to work there_. Yet, the structure of the selection process functioned as a barrier to some participants. 2008:12:F stated _you often think, "how hard are the online forms?" At times, it almost felt like a full-time job making the applications. So, the level of time involved in the application process would determine whether I wanted to apply for the role or not_. Some applicants were also put off by _technical or multiple assessment stages_ (26:2020:F), _too much bureaucracy_ (27:2020:M), _deferrals_ to start date (10:2008:M; 12:2008:F), and a _lack of confidence in their abilities to navigate the selection process_ (17:2008:F).

The 'Brand Recognition & Reputation' and the 'Selection Process' also helped inform applicants of the 'Work Environment'. For example, 21:2020:F spoke about trying to *find the best possible fit* and how *walking into an organisation gives you a feeling of whether this is the right place for you*. However, whilst male and female participants broadly shared similar perspectives, a majority of the female participants also reported a desire for *work-life balance*, *mental health awareness*, and *family-friendly work conditions* (19:2008:F; 22:2020:F; 25:2020F; 26:2020:F).

Theme 2: Supply and demand

The theme 'Supply & Demand' is defined as comparing the supply of graduates entering the labour market to the demand for ECT from organisations. This encompasses three sub-themes: 'Job Role & Security', 'Location & Commute', and 'Starting Salary & Benefits'. When comparing the two cohorts, 'Job Role & Security' was more important to 2020 graduates, whilst 'Location & Commute' was more important to 2008 graduates.

Entry into the labour market occurred during the Global Financial Crisis for 2008 graduates and the COVID-19 pandemic for 2020 graduates. These global-level chance events meant that *we were in a recession; hence jobs were rare* (15:2008:F), *the labour market was unstable and volatile due to the pandemic* (18:2020:M), and *the graduate market was so poor due to COVID-19 it was just a case of taking any job that was offered* (22:2020:F). The lack of demand for graduates compared to supply meant that individuals often sacrificed their initial desires for POF by *applying to as many firms as possible because they might face rejection from every one of them* (20:2020:M). This often increased the risk of subsequent turnover of these hires as individuals *took whatever job they could get and then looked around for something else as the market recovered in the following years* (19:2008:F).

An area of interest in the findings was the differing views between 'Job Role & Security' and 'Location & Commute'. The differences appear to be informed by experience

within the labour market and retrospective reframing of the desired POF. For example, the 2020 graduates reported that *a progressive employer was safer in terms of job security during the pandemic* (18:2020:M) and that *with the timing of my graduation with the COVID-19 pandemic, there was so much uncertainty and so I wanted somewhere that had a bit more job security and stability* (22:2020:F). In contrast, the 2008 graduates emphasised the *job's location, commute length, living cost,* and *the amount of travelling involved in the role* (7:2008:F; 10:2008:M, 12:2008:F, 15:2008:F).

Finally, both 2008 and 2020 graduates emphasised 'Starting Salary & Benefits' (6:2008:M; 8:2008:M; 13:2020:F; 26:2020:F). One of the reasons for this was summed up by 10:2008:M, who stated *I've done the course, graduated from uni, and now I want to see all the fruits of my labour come together, and I can start my career. So, justifying the decision to have taken part in education up to that point and the salary and benefits reflecting the costs involved*.

RQ2: What can employers learn from graduate perspectives about the retention of early-career talent?

Theme 3: Career progression

The theme 'Career Progression' is defined as moving forward in one's career and encompasses sub-themes of 'Training Opportunities', 'Job Crafting', and 'Meaningful Work'. Generally, there was a substantial alignment between the views of 2008 and 2020 graduates.

Participants cited a lack of career progression as the top reason for leaving an organisation. For example, *I don't think I was progressing as much as I wanted to. So it felt like a natural time to look elsewhere* (9:2008:M) *if there isn't much room for career progression and I find the role not challenging enough* (13:2020:F), and *if my career did not advance as quickly as I would like, then I would leave* (11:2020:M). This was linked to the sub-theme of 'Training Opportunities', which nearly every participant in the study mentioned.

Specifically, there was a demand for *tailored opportunities* (12:2008:F), *growth opportunities incorporating career mapping* (24:2008:M; 27:2020:M), and a desire for organisations to *fund professional qualifications* (3:2020:M) or *Master's degrees* (26:2020:F).

Additionally, 'Job Crafting' and 'Meaningful Work' featured heavily in participants' responses. Examples included *making sure I'm working on projects that I find interesting and valuable to the firm* (8:2008:M) and *the need to understand how my work benefits the client. How does it help the company? What contributions have I personally made*? (16:2020:F). Another participant, 5:2008:F, questioned whether *a specific individual skillset is valued within the organisation and whether it can be utilised differently. Are there other roles in the company? Are there different roles that could potentially be formed that would still help the growth and development of the organisation without losing that particular talent?* The critical emphasis from the participants was on adding value, conducting interesting work, and being supported to progress in their careers.

Theme 4: Health and well-being

The theme 'Health & Well-being' is defined as the perception of an individual's positive state of physical and mental health and encompasses sub-themes of 'Working Relationships' and 'Flexible Working'. Again, there was a strong consensus between responses from 2008 and 2020 graduates. The difference in views surrounding location and commute from an attraction perspective subsequently aligned when discussing in the context of retention.

Participants spoke about the importance of *having a leadership team that everyone looks up to, who has their lives in check, and you think, "yes, I want to be like them in ten years" – they've got that balance between their personal and career goals which is inspiring* (10:2008:M). This extended to diversity and inclusion via the comment *that the entire community within a workplace needs to be represented and involved in conversations. That way, we avoid isolating groups of people and instead work on ways for the entire company to*

support the agenda (16:2020:F). Moreover, participants disliked forced-ranking approaches to performance appraisals. They called for *performance management to be done on merit against a set of criteria whereby your grade is determined by whether you met these criteria or not. This leads to collaborative work and benefits the organisation, clients, and employees, leading to win-win outcomes* (10:2008:M). Poor working relationships also appeared to create snowball effects whereby *the team around plummeted, I always describe it as a sinking ship'* (17:2008:F), and *it was a sinking ship with at least one person leaving every week; it was clear the company was going under fast, so it felt like time to leave* (4:2008:M). This was particularly evident when *staff members did not feel valued by their employer and felt like a number or a resource rather than an individual* (22:2020:F).

Furthermore, participants strongly emphasised 'Flexible Working' arrangements to support their well-being. Discussions centred on *flexible and part-time opportunities as part of family-friendly policies* (19:2008:F), the need to avoid *long working hours or being taken advantage of* (11:2020:M) and *getting bored of having to travel to remote locations for different client projects* (10:2008:M). There was also support for a *four-day week at full-time pay* (16:2020:F) and a desire for hybrid working to *promote work-life balance* (21:2020:F) and to reduce instances of *commuting up to two hours each way each day* (1:2008:M).

Finally, a majority of female participants (in contrast to male participants who did not mention these aspects) called for adequate resources *to deal with the general stress of the job* (23:2008:F), with a particular focus on *mental health support* (21:2020:F) and awareness by employers of people experiencing *post-grad blues and depression because you miss the uni lifestyle and go from being highly sociable to working 9am-5pm* (25:2020:F).

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Theme 5: Remuneration

The theme 'Remuneration' is defined as a collective term for how an employee is compensated for their work and encompasses one sub-theme of 'Salary & Benefits Progression'. No variance was identified between the two cohorts.

Participants felt that entering the labour market during the Global Financial Crisis resulted in *the pay not being that generous due to the recession* (15:2008:F). When the market conditions began to improve, the pay rises for existing employees often failed to keep up with the market rate, which was described as *a little short-sighted* (24:2008:M). The practice of organisations *only offering a pay rise when an employee finds another job often comes too late, resulting in a high cost in replacing talent and getting them up to speed* (15:2008:F). Moreover, *where pay raises are only offered reactively, the employee might not feel like they've deserved it even though they do. So, I guess an organisation can pay attention to this. As an employee, I would feel more comfortable at the organisation, stopping me from leaving or considering other jobs* (28:2020:M).

Female participants also discussed the benefits offered in addition to salary to a much greater extent than males. For example, *addressing the gender pay gap based on salary and benefits as a complete package is key to retaining staff* (19:2008:F), and *maternity leave is going to be really important when retaining staff because you want to know you are going to be cared for in the future as well* (22:2020:F). This suggests that organisations *will need to take a more holistic approach and identify what resources they have to support the differing needs of their employees* (25:2020:F).

Summary

Model

Figure 2 provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes classified into three groups 'Establishing Fit', 'Maintaining or Enhancing Fit', and 'Desirable Sustainable Outcomes'. This captures the iterative and evolving process of POF over time based on the findings and analysis. When establishing fit, early-career talent seeks to gauge the company culture based on signals obtained from branding, during the selection process, and from assessing the work environment. Additionally, the opportunity to promote job security, job location, and salary/benefits into consideration often depends on the external labour market conditions, grouped by supply and demand. In an employer's market, the individual may have to sacrifice some of these aspects, for example, undertaking a long commute to the office. In contrast, a candidate-friendly market may offer greater opportunities for negotiation with a potential employer. Subsequently, employees need to feel supported, respected, and valued to maintain or enhance fit. Finally, the desirable outcomes at the individual level of career progression, health and wellbeing, and remuneration translate to competitive advantage, increased productivity due to a reduction in absenteeism or presenteeism, and increased return on investment and profitability for the organisation.

Insert Figure 2 here

Person-organisation fit assessment matrix

During the research interviews, one participant noted *there is a benefit to having new people come into an organisation, and existing people leave* (9:2008:M). This valid point was also complemented by views including *if there was a change of management that changed the culture of the organisation, I would leave* (22:2020:F), and *if the business shifted in such a way that I thought I wasn't of value to it and couldn't offer anymore to make it more successful or to see the impact of my actions benefiting the business, I think at that point I would probably leave* (8:2008:M).

Combined with the findings and analysis of the five themes, these viewpoints underpinned a Person-Organisation Fit Assessment Matrix (Figure 3). This captures how the position of an individual or an organisation can either 'remain the same' or 'evolve' over time.

Insert Figure 3 here

The notes section in Figure 3 highlights five scenarios where turnover benefits both parties and five scenarios where retention is advantageous to both parties (albeit in one of these cases, there is a risk of stagnation that can threaten sustainability). Additionally, there is one scenario where turnover benefits the organisation more and one where it helps the person more. Figure 3 can also be visualised as a cube whereby time represents the third dimension.

Discussion

The findings empirically support the view that early-career talent, like mid-career and late-career talent, seek purpose and meaning in their work to a greater extent following the pandemic (Afshari, 2021). The findings also align with those of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (2022), whereby a desire for Good Work incorporates dimensions of (i) pay and benefits, (ii) contracts, (iii) work-life balance, (iv) job design and the nature of work, (v) relationships at work, (vi) employee voice, and (vii) health and wellbeing (pp.3-4). However, these themes are extended by emphasising learning and progression opportunities (as conceptually proposed by Donald et al., 2020). It is reasonable to suggest that the lived experiences of the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis and/or the COVID-19 pandemic have led early-career talent to recognise the potential impacts of global-level chance events and associated career shocks (Akkermans et al., 2021). The focus on learning reflects conceptual views that lifelong and lifewide learning can facilitate career agency (Cole and Donald, 2022).

A desire for career progression reflects increased openness to inter- and intra-organisational mobility (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022).

The findings suggest broad alignment between 2008 and 2020 graduates, supporting the claim that variances between these groups in the workplace are often overstated (Zaharee et al., 2018). The key difference is the prioritisation of factors, whereby 2020 graduates prioritise job roles and job security, whereas 2008 graduates prioritise job location and commute duration. The findings reflect how POF can emerge over time (Vleugels et al., 2019), potentially reflecting how acquiring resources and experience can offer increased agency. Additionally, when comparing responses by gender, male participants did not offer any suggestions that female participants did not also offer. In contrast, female participants also discussed the need for work-life balance, family-friendly working conditions, flexible working, and the significance of maternity leave for attracting and retaining staff. The findings suggest that despite the narrowing of the gender pay gap for early-career talent, the onus is still disproportionately falling on female workers to consider and plan for care responsibilities (Petts, Carlson, and Pepin, 2021). Employers also appear to be correct in placing the attraction and subsequent retention of diverse talent as their top challenge for the next decade (The Careers 2032 Project, 2022).

Theoretical implications

The contribution of this study comes from an empirical investigation into new theorising of POF via semi-structured interviews with ECT, whereby employee experience and insights can drive sustainable HRM policies. Specifically, the POF literature is integrated with 'person', 'context', and 'time' dimensions from sustainable careers and sustainable HRM literature (De Vos et al., 2020; Vleugels et al., 2019). Figure 3 advances an emerging aspect of POF literature, capturing fit evolution over time (Vleugels et al., 2019). This addresses calls to capture the

interplay between talent management strategies and career impacts (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022).

Furthermore, this study develops a theoretical understanding of how PEF theory can help frame employees' turnover intention and quit behaviours (Grobler and Rensburg, 2019). Employees are considered the most critical resource for organisational sustainability (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022), placing significant emphasis on talent management strategies. Moreover, POF is the most influential determinant of job satisfaction and employee loyalty (Dhir et al., 2020). Thus this study considers different orientations of ECT to inform talent management strategies of organisations and acknowledge the role that the external environment can play in influencing POF. The findings empirically support the view that there are instances where employee retention can be detrimental to an organisation (Boswell et al., 2017) and continues a recent departure from the more traditional view of POF in organisational behaviour research that the decision to leave an organisation is framed as a 'strategy of last resort' (Follmer et al., 2018). The study also provides some of the earliest qualitative insights into what functional turnover scenarios may entail.

Recommendations to organisations

Graduates feel organisations can attract ECT via the 'Company Culture' and 'Supply and Demand' dimensions. The findings support the view that employer branding is an antecedent to retention (Bharadwaj et al., 2022) and can influence the candidate's choice of employer via POF assessment (Huang, 2022; Tanwar and Kumar, 2019). There is also support for the view that the recruitment process also plays a role in establishing POF (Jackson et al., 2022) as a reflection of the work environment. 'Starting Salary & Benefits' also continue to be a consideration for graduates when evaluating the attractiveness of an employer (Zaharee et al., 2018). Moreover, talent retention via systematic human capital management remains a critical

area of focus for organisational sustainability (Redondo et al., 2021). Graduates from both cohorts agreed that their decision to stay with an organisation is driven by 'Career Progression', 'Health & Well-being' and 'Remuneration'. The findings empirically support the proposition that there may be less difference between millennials' and earlier generations' views concerning retention than is sometimes portrayed (Zaharee et al., 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic, as a global chance event, has influenced POF, whereby individuals have re-evaluated their life priorities. The findings indicate that individuals now see a greater fit with employers who provide meaningful work opportunities and prioritise their health and well-being. This builds on previous research by Donald and Jackson (2022), whereby almost three-quarters of recent graduates reported a drop in self-perceived subjective well-being due to the pandemic. Participants of the study called on organisations to provide an environment where they could 'learn' and 'earn' concurrently by offering training opportunities, job crafting, and salary and benefits progression. The study findings support the view that organisations that do not offer flexible working options will place themselves at a disadvantage over their competitors (Borg and Scott-Young, 2022). However, the desire for flexible working appears to emerge over time since 2020 graduates prioritised job roles and job security, whereas 2008 graduates prioritised job location and commute duration.

The study provides empirical validation that a perceived lack of POF leads to a need for change either from the environmental or employee sides (Ostroff and Aumann, 2004). This suggests that motivations to stay or leave an organisation during or after a global chance event can evolve. Organisations need to be aware of such shifts in POF since establishing and maintaining PEF takes on increased significance for organisations where the demand for personnel exceeds the supply (Borg & Scott-Young, 2022). The findings indicate that failure to address these concerns can exacerbate personnel shocks via turnover contagion (Porter and Rigby, 2021). Therefore, organisations that address such concerns can benefit by helping to

mitigate the disruption, costs, and lost productivity associated with ECT turnover at the organisational level. A process map for addressing ECT attraction and retention is provided in Figure 2.

Limitations and future research

Limitations of our research include only focusing on participants who could conduct their specific jobs from home during the COVID-19 pandemic 'work from home guidelines' issued by the UK Government. Future research may benefit from looking at the views of graduates working in other sectors or who have been unable to secure employment opportunities to understand how attraction and retention strategies may align or differentiate. This study also focuses solely on the views of 2020 and 2008 graduates. Future research could look at the graduates' views from other years, specifically those who graduated when global-level chance events did not suppress the demand for graduates. The views of additional stakeholders could also be considered, such as recent work looking at university career advisors and graduate recruiters as part of a knowledge-sharing approach to sustainable career and organisational outcomes (Buckholtz and Donald, 2022; Donald et al., 2021).

Moreover, an inability to infer causality is a typical limitation of post-positivist studies. Future research may benefit from the triangulation of findings via quantitative studies or alternative qualitative approaches, including focus groups. There may be benefits from comparing data from different countries, diverse types of organisations, or different participant demographics (e.g., social class or race and ethnicity). Longitudinal studies could also help to investigate the evolution of POF over time.

Conclusion

Drawing on a framework of Person-Organisation Fit (POF) theory, this paper aimed to understand how organisations can establish and maintain sustainable early-career talent pipelines. Graduates feel that 'Company Culture' and 'Supply & Demand' are key themes associated with talent attraction. However, 2020 graduates prioritised the job role and job security, whereas 2008 graduates prioritised job location and commute duration. Three additional themes were related to ECT retention: 'Career Progression', 'Health & Well-being', and 'Remuneration', with no variance by cohort. The study extends POF research and bridges the shared sustainability themes of 'person', 'context', and 'time' from vocational behaviour and HRM literature streams. Recommendations to organisations are also provided to identify pragmatic approaches to attracting and retaining early-career talent.

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Table I: Participant Information

ID	Gender	Age	Year of Graduation	Sector Joined After Graduation
1	Male	34	2008	Education
2	Female	24	2020	Marketing
3	Male	24	2020	Finance
4	Male	34	2008	Technology
5	Female	34	2008	Recruitment
6	Male	34	2008	Technology
7	Female	34	2008	Technology
8	Male	34	2008	Technology
9	Male	34	2008	Consulting
10	Male	34	2008	Consulting
11	Male	23	2020	Finance
12	Female	34	2008	Finance
13	Female	24	2020	Administration
14	Female	34	2008	Administration
15	Female	34	2008	Publishing
16	Female	23	2020	Finance
17	Female	34	2008	Retail
18	Male	23	2020	Recruitment
19	Female	34	2008	Administration
20	Male	24	2020	Journalism
21	Female	24	2020	Teaching
22	Female	23	2020	Higher Education
23	Female	34	2008	Finance
24	Male	34	2008	Finance
25	Female	23	2020	Higher Education
26	Female	24	2020	Engineering
27	Male	24	2020	Healthcare
28	Male	32	2020	Administration

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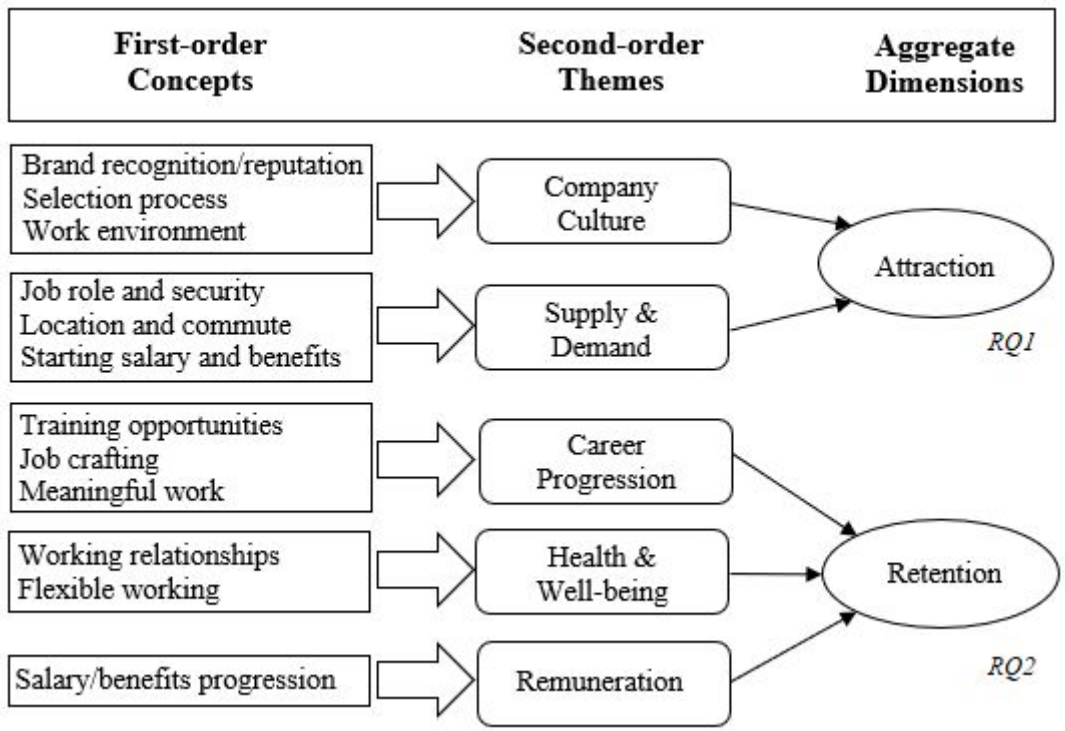48
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Figure 1

Figure 1: Thematic Analysis Report

Figure 2
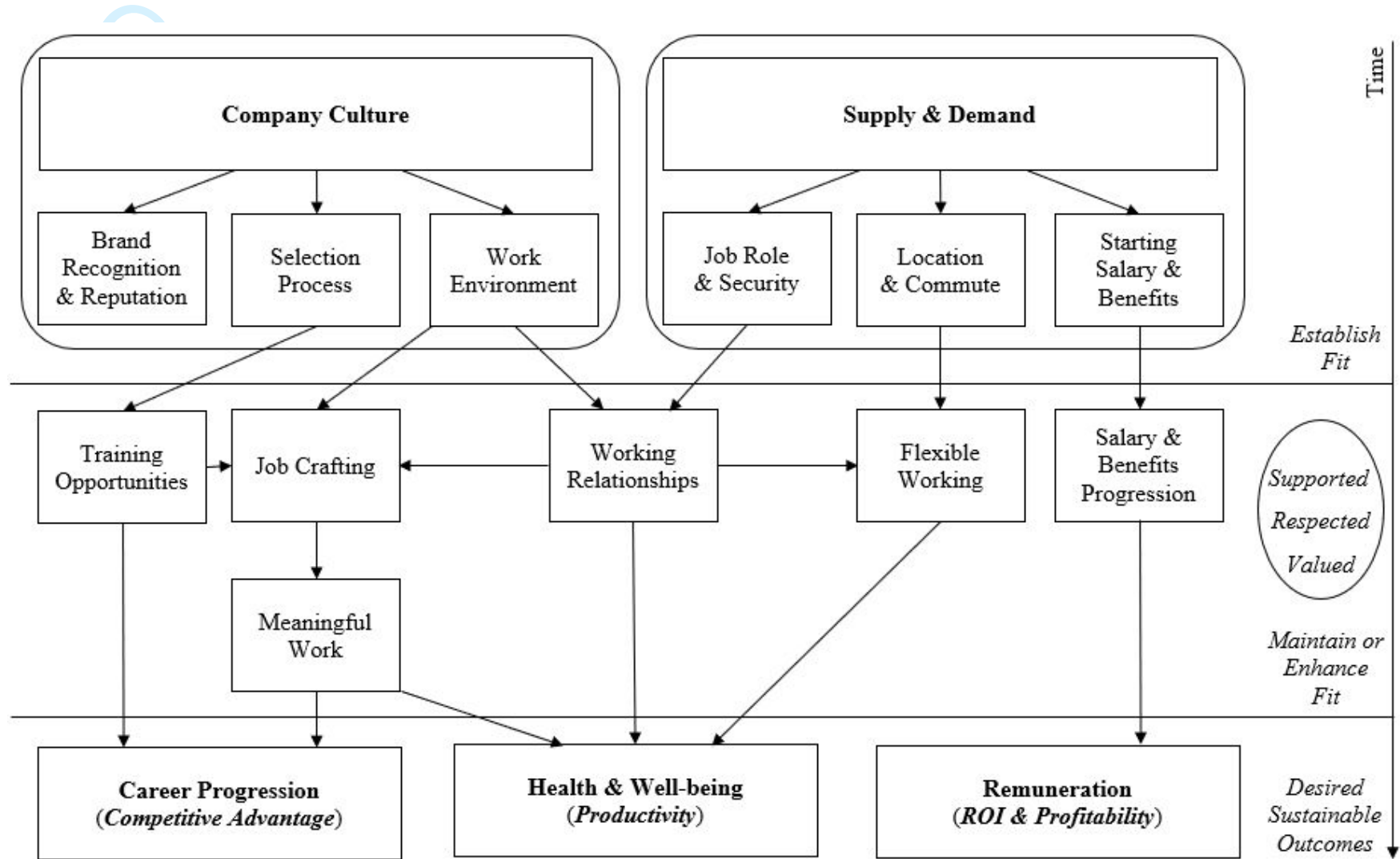
Figure 2: Early Career Attraction and Retention Model. © 2023 Author. Used with permission.

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Figure 3

Figure 3: Person-Organisation Fit Assessment Matrix. © 2023 Author. Used with permission.