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Strategies to Retain Seasoned Federal Acquisition Employees

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College of Management and Technology

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Patricia D. Wells

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Strategies to Retain Seasoned Federal Acquisition Employees

by

Patricia D. Wells

MBA, Salem International University, 2013

MAPD, Dallas Baptist University, 2003

BS, University of South Carolina, 1985

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

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December 2022

Abstract

Failure to retain seasoned acquisition employees negatively impacts an organization's performance and outcomes. Managers need retention strategies to retain seasoned employees, as failure to retain seasoned employees results in capability gaps, decreased productivity, and increased expenses associated with recruiting and training new hires and transfers. Grounded in the social exchange theory, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies midlevel managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees. The primary participants consisted of six midlevel federal acquisition managers of a federal agency who used strategies to retain seasoned acquisition employees. The secondary participants were five employees from the same organization supervised by midlevel federal acquisition managers. Data were collected using semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up, a focus group, a review of organizational policies and initiatives, and reflective journaling. Through thematic analysis, five themes were identified: (a) positive work environment, (b) employee engagement, (c) job satisfaction, (d) work-life balance, and (e) leadership. A key recommendation is for managers to create a positive work environment through: (a) respect for employees and their contributions, (b) open dyadic communication with employees, (c) support of employees, and (d) building trust through the alignment of words and actions. The implications for positive social change include the potential to facilitate inclusive work environments and retain highly qualified employees in critical positions.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Employee turnover increases expense and inefficiency (Massingham, 2018). Thus, research to better understand employee turnover can provide supporting evidence of successful retention strategies. In this qualitative single case study, I explored successful retention strategies federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned employees.

Section 1 consists of a discussion of the problem background, problem statement, nature of the study, research question, interview questions, operational definitions, assumptions, significance, and review of the literature. Section 2 consists of the research methodology and design, population and sampling, data collection and analysis, and reliability and validity. Finally, Section 3 consists of the study findings.

Background of the Problem

Employees leave an organization for different reasons (Fletcher et al., 2018). Although there may be more, employee engagement, career development and advancement, employee fit, work/life balance, and organizational culture are six reasons employees leave their employers. The impact of managers failing to retain employees includes: (a) increased costs associated with training new and transferring existing employees, (b) increased loss of employee knowledge and talent, (c) decreased organizational performance, and (d) increased employee workloads (Massingham, 2018). Thus, organizational outcomes and profitability decrease when employees leave, especially highly skilled employees.

Contract specialists are a highly skilled, specialized group in the acquisition workforce (Federal Acquisition Institute, 2018). Contract specialists are a mission critical workforce element that represents about 80% of the federal acquisition workforce. Additionally, contract specialists support all federal agencies' operations and acquisitions, including the Department of Defense (DoD) (Federal Acquisition Institute, 2017, 2018). Despite being a mission critical workforce, the turnover rate of the specialized career field of contracting remains higher than other federal workforce groups (Federal Acquisition Institute, 2017). As a result, federal acquisition managers need strategies to retain seasoned contract specialists.

Problem Statement

Retaining highly qualified federal acquisition employees is critical to the operation of federal institutions, which include the Department of Defense Warfighter's mission (Brien, 2020). However, federal acquisition employees are transferring out of their agencies at a rate of 3%, 2% higher than the federal government-wide workforce transfer rate of 1% (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2022). The general business problem was that acquisition employee turnover can lead to a decrease in seasoned employees (highly skilled and qualified acquisition workforce), resulting in decreased organizational efficiency and productivity. The specific business problem was that some midlevel federal acquisition managers lack strategies to retain seasoned acquisition employees.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees. The target population consisted of midlevel federal acquisition managers from a federal acquisition organization in the southeastern United States who have developed successful strategies to retain seasoned acquisition employees. This study's findings might contribute to social change by increasing employee job satisfaction and improving federal support services provided locally, nationally, and internationally benefiting the welfare of others through humanitarian efforts.

Nature of the Study

Researchers employ a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method methodology to conduct research. Using closed-ended questions, quantitative researchers collect quantifiable data to test hypotheses (Yin, 2018). I did not test hypotheses. Therefore, the quantitative method was not appropriate for this study. Mixed-methods researchers employ both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyze data (Yin, 2018). The mixed method was not appropriate as I did not employ the quantitative method to conduct my study. Comparatively, using open-ended questions, qualitative researchers seek to explore and understand phenomena to develop meaning within its context (Yin, 2018). Accordingly, I used the qualitative method to ask participants open-ended questions to identify and explore strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees. As such, the qualitative method was appropriate for my study.

For my study, I considered the following qualitative designs: (a) focus groups, (b) phenomenology, (c) miniethnography, and (d) single case study. Researchers employ a focus group design to collect data through informal groups about their perceptions of ideas and thoughts and are frequently used to assess consumers' attitudes and opinions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). However, focus group research was not appropriate for my primary design as the group setting negates participants' confidentiality, which might limit participants' disclosure of rich descriptive data as well as might contribute to group conformance. Phenomenological researchers focus on the personal meaning of specific shared lived experiences of individuals to describe the essence of the experience and understand the meaning of the experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In my study, I did not focus on a specific shared lived experience of individuals to describe the essence of the experience. Miniethnography researchers, focusing on a narrow area of inquiry, seek an understanding of a culture's norms, values, and roles through direct interaction with and observation of the culture of a particular group (Fusch et al., 2017; Yin, 2018) to gather detailed observational evidence (Yin, 2018). The objective of my study was not to understand the cultural norms, values, and workplace roles through the observation of the organizational culture. Hence, a miniethnography design was not the best approach for my study. My objective was to collect in depth, rich descriptive data from midlevel federal acquisition managers within the context of a federal contracting acquisition agency to better understand retention strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees. Case study researchers conduct research within a bounded case to study a

real-world phenomenon within the context of the case (Yin, 2018). As such, case study researchers use the bounded case to establish the scope of data collection.

Additionally, case study researchers seek to understand and gain insights into a phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Using multiple case studies, case study researchers gather data to analyze different perspectives across cases for comparisons and to draw conclusions across cases (Yin, 2018). In contrast, case study researchers use a single case study to focus on one issue, bound within the context of one organization, to gather deep, rich data to gain a better understanding of the issue (Yin, 2018). I did not seek to compare and explore contrasts across cases in my study. Accordingly, a single case study bounding the population within one organization was appropriate to identify strategies midlevel federal acquisition managers within one specific organization used to retain seasoned acquisition employees.

Research Question

What strategies do midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to improve the retention of seasoned acquisition employees in your organization?

2. How did you measure the effectiveness of your strategies to retain seasoned acquisition employees?

3. What strategies did you find that worked best to retain seasoned acquisition employees?

4. What key challenges to implementing the successful strategies did you encounter?

5. How did you address the key challenges to implementing the successful strategies for retaining seasoned acquisition employees?

6. What additional information can you share about the strategies you used to retain seasoned acquisition employees?

Conceptual Framework

For my study, I proposed a conceptual framework built on constructs from the social exchange theory (SET). One of the foundational tenants of the SET is that social exchanges are based on reciprocity; more succinctly stated, exchanges that are interdependent and contingent on the other party's actions in the exchange (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). Homans and Blau fashioned the SET in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Blau, 1964, 1977; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958, 1974). Homans (1958) and Blau (1964) employed foundational tenants of the SET to explain social exchange patterns in small groups. In 1958, Homans argued the concept of social behavior as exchange. Homans expanded his argument in 1961, addressing elementary forms of social behavior. In 1964, Blau introduced the concept of exchange as power, strengthening the legitimacy of the SET. Blau (1977) and Homans (1974) continued to expand the SET in the 1970s, with Blau expanding on the concept of understanding interactions as a form of exchange shaped by a reciprocal exchange, while Homans focused on exchanges as cost and rewards. Emerson (1976) further expanded the theory explaining relationships and interactions between individuals and parties.

Blau, Homans, and Emerson espoused the fundamental concept that gains, and losses drive behavior (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). In summation, people make choices about social interactions based on their satisfaction within a given relationship (Nachmias et al., 2022). Consequently, a conceptual framework undergirded by constructs from the SET was the interpretive lens for me to discover and understand the successful strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned employees.

Operational Definitions

Acquisition employees: Acquisition employees are federal government civilian personnel in the federal acquisition workforce that work across the Department of Defense (DoD) and other federal agencies in more than a dozen functional fields to include technology, logistics, and contracting, who are responsible for identifying developing, buying, and managing goods and services to support the military or other federal agencies (Schwartz et al., 2016).

Employee turnover: Employee turnover, as defined by Allen et al. (2010), is the voluntary separation of an employee from an organization initiated by the employee.

Midlevel manager: Midlevel manager in the context of the federal government, where there are heads of executive departments and agencies, consist of managers at subordinate office levels responsible for organizing work to accomplish the agency's mission in the most efficient and economical manner as well as developing and using employee talents as fully as possible (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2009).

Seasoned employees: Seasoned employees are high-quality, experienced employees with four or more years of institutional knowledge (Cho & Lewis, 2012).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Acknowledging assumptions, limitations, and delimitations in research contributes to quality research and bounds the interpretation of findings and research claims (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). My research aimed to inform the body of literature on employee retention strategies. Accordingly, failure to acknowledge assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of findings would diminish the creditability of my research. Hence, this section addressed research assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Assumptions

Researchers make assumptions about aspects of the study that are ultimately outside of the researcher's control. Hence, assumptions made in research are based on what researchers believe to be true but lack material evidence to validate (Ellis & Levy, 2009). For example, in a qualitative case study where the researcher employs interviews to collect rich data, the researcher assumes that participants will make a concerted effort to provide truthful responses to the interview questions that the researcher asks. One of my assumptions was that participants were truthful in their responses to interview questions. My second assumption was that the participants interviewed could provide in-depth and rich descriptions of successful retention strategies used that contribute to the retention of seasoned acquisition employees in their organization. When these

assumptions are true, they contribute to the internal validity of the research (Ellis & Levy, 2009).

Limitations

Limitations are research constraints typically driven by the research methodology and design and are out of the researcher's control (Ellis & Levy, 2009; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The self-reporting nature of interview responses from participants presents limitations in the study as there was a potential for participants to inject bias into their responses. The qualitative methodology and the single case study design limited the study as I cannot infer generalization and causality in my findings.

Delimitations

Delimitations are limits imposed by the researcher (Ellis & Levy, 2009; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Such delimitations include but are not limited to the interview questions, the study sample, and theoretical constructs. Delimitations of my study included: (a) study participants consisting of only midlevel federal acquisition managers and not managers at all levels and (b) the study sample coming from one federal acquisition agency and no other acquisition agency or industry. These delimitations also prevented my inference of generalization of the findings.

Significance of the Study

My study findings could be valuable to business leaders as failure to retain seasoned employees can result in increased workloads, a loss of institutional knowledge, a loss of high-performing employees, and the chronic costs associated with recruiting and hiring new employees. Retaining seasoned employees mitigates these issues, improving

organizational efficiency and productivity, giving organizations a competitive advantage (Narayanan et al., 2019; Younge & Marx, 2016). Younge and Marx (2016) referred to the retention of seasoned employees as the key to a competitive advantage, while Narayanan et al. (2019) noted that the retention of seasoned employees was the prime source of competitive advantage. Thus, strategies to retain seasoned employees should be part of an organization's strategic plan to retain organizational knowledge, grow employees, enhance productivity, and create a competitive advantage.

Moreover, this study's findings could further contribute to the value of businesses, and effective business practices, as business leaders might use the findings to retain high-performing or hard to retain occupational groups. Additionally, leaders who read the study might leverage strategies identified in the findings to facilitate positive social change by improving employee job satisfaction and by investing cost savings from retaining employees to initiatives that affect positive social change at the community level. For example, leaders could invest in environmental, inclusion, and homeless initiatives at the community level, particularly for homeless veterans, contributing to positive social change.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

A review of the professional and academic literature related to the study phenomenon was foundational to constructing and interpreting the research. The literature was critical to conceptualizing the business problem and developing the study's conceptual framework against the backdrop of previous empirical studies and other professional and academic literature (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2017; Collins & Stockton,

2018). The literature revealed existing knowledge related to the study's business problem, relevant vital concepts, and linked concepts as qualitative researchers use professional and academic knowledge from existing studies to propose a conceptual framework and ground the relevant literature. Moreover, the conceptual framework guided the study and provided a lens for interpreting the study.

In this review, I critically analyzed and synthesized the literature that pertained to my study's purpose and the SET. I included past and current peer-reviewed literature that informed and supported my study and identified previous constructs and related themes. I incorporated the literature from supporting and contrasting theories and models that informed my conceptual framework. In addition, I reviewed and gathered empirical information that linked employee retention to my conceptual framework. Moreover, my literature review facilitated the development of a logical structure of related concepts, how concepts in my study are related, and how concepts in this study related to other relevant research and concepts in the academic and professional literature.

I used scholarly sources to conduct my literature review. First, I reviewed seminal authors' works and related peer-reviewed literature on the SET, employee retention, and employee turnover. My reviewed sources for my study comprised 129 sources, of which over 65% were within 5 years of my anticipated graduation date. Peer-reviewed journal articles comprised 84% of my sources.

Databases used included Business Source Complete, ABI/Inform Complete, Sage Journals, EBSCO, Emerald Management, Government publications and reports, and Google Scholar. I used pertinent key terms in the search engines: *employee retention,*

employee turnover, social exchange theory, job embeddedness theory, motivation

theories, leader member exchange theory, organizational support theory, perceived

organizational support, and *talent and knowledge management.*

In the proceeding sections of my review, organized by topics, I addressed seminal

authors of the SET and pertinent academic and professional literature identified using the

databases. First, I discussed the purpose of my study and the SET concepts that supported

my conceptual framework. I followed that section with a historical perspective where I

discussed seminal authors such as Homans, Blau, and Emerson's contributions to

developing the concept of social exchanges. Next, I discussed supporting theories of job

embeddedness, leader member exchange, and organizational support, followed by

contrasting theories of systems and job characteristics. In the next section, I discussed

retention and voluntary turnover. Finally, I closed the literature review by addressing

central concepts and themes. The subsection under central concepts and themes included

career development and advancement, organizational culture, organizational performance

and outcomes, talent and knowledge management, corporate social responsibility, and

virtual work environment in the context of employee retention.

Application of Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore successful

retention strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers used to retain seasoned

acquisition employees. I utilized a conceptual framework built on SET constructs to

investigate successful retention strategies in the context of federal acquisitions. Thus, the

SET constructs framed my research and served as the blueprint for my research processes

and the lens for interpreting my study. Furthermore, I investigated my business problem within the context of federal acquisitions with acquisition managers as participants afforded me a specific environment within the real-life context of the phenomenon's occurrence. In the active context, I gathered rich data that managers could use to implement successful retention strategies to retain top talent.

Social Exchange Theory

A conceptual framework built on the SET was the lens for interpreting my study. The foundational tenant of SET is social exchanges, predicated on reciprocity, where exchanges are interdependent and contingent on the other party's actions in the exchange (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). Social exchange theorists have posited that the continuation of exchanges is dependent on the value of the exchange. Social exchange theorists have also espoused that those involved in the social exchange calculate the value of the exchange based on a formula of Reward – Cost (time and effort) = Profit (Blau, 1964, 1977; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958; Kuvaas et al., 2020; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012).

Parties of a social exchange use key attributes to assess the quality of an exchange. In social exchanges, values and rewards align with constructs of the SET (Blau, 1964, 1977; Kuvaas et al., 2020). Trust, a primary construct of the SET, is a dominant attribute in positive social exchanges. Accordingly, parties in the social exchange perceive trust, interpreted as loyalty, as a valuable exchange (Bande et al., 2019; Blau, 1964, 1977; Kuvaas et al., 2020). Like trust, the constructs of reward and fairness are also key attributes in assigning value in an exchange. The reward (value,

benefit) from an exchange minus the cost of the exchange to the person equals profit (overall value) gained in the exchange. Therefore, when a party to a social exchange deems their time and effort allocated to an exchange is more valuable than the profit from the exchange, that party terminates the relationship.

In organizations, the perceived value of social exchanges impacts the organization's relationship with stakeholders. Social exchange researchers' findings support the premise that rewards associated with social exchanges between a business and stakeholders can impact organizational outcomes (Kuvaas et al., 2020; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012) examined community support of a government initiative within the context of the SET. Nunkoo and Ramkissoon used a quantitative study to investigate community members' support of tourism using the SET constructs of trust and power. Nunkoo and Ramkissoon analyzed data collected using a stratified random sampling method. In addition, the researchers analyzed data collected using a questionnaire from 531 permanent residents 18 years of age and older from Mauritius Island in the Western Indian Ocean. The researchers found that residents' support for tourism was contingent on their trust in government actors and their perceived benefit, cost, and degree of power in the exchange. The higher the level of the resident's perceived power, the higher the level of trust the resident had in the government actors.

Employees consider both the social and economic value of social exchanges. Thus, similarly, within the context of an organization, Kuvaas et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the relationship between employee base and variable pay and their social and economic exchange relationship with their employer. Kuvaas et al.

conducted a 30-month cross-lagged study. They analyzed data collected from 488 male and female employees from a Norwegian insurance company using a five-point Likert scale survey. Kuvaas et al.'s findings reflected that the higher the accumulated pay, the stronger the social exchange relationship. The findings aligned with the SET constructs of trust as loyalty. In addition, Kuvaas et al.'s findings demonstrated that the successful exchanges of work effort for variable pay strengthened an economic exchange relationship.

Within the context of employee retention in an organization, social exchanges can be between the individual and the organization or an individual and another individual, including supervisors and others in leadership positions. Within this context, employee engagement, fairness (procedural and distributive justice), job satisfaction, reward, respect, career advancement, and career development are additional relevant constructs of the SET. Thus, my conceptual framework, built on constructs from the SET, linked employee social exchanges in an organization, social exchange concepts, and retention themes in the scholarly literature with employee turnover and retention. In addition, my conceptual framework aligned with my research question and aided in understanding and identifying successful retention strategies that midlevel acquisition managers use to retain seasoned employees.

Historical Perspective

The foundational tenants of the SET were developed and advanced by three pivotal figures. These pivotal figures, Homans (1958, 1974), Blau (1964, 1977), and Emerson (1976), are known as the primary seminal authors of the SET. Building on

Skinner's psychology studies (Skinner, 1953) on operant behavior, Homans developed the SET (Homans, 1958,1974). Whereas Skinner's research focused on conditioning animal behavior using rewards (positive reinforcement) and punishments, Homans applied the reward (reinforcement) concept to social exchanges between small groups of people where the reward was based on the perceived quality of the exchange. Thus, Homans developed the concept of social exchange based on reciprocity, rewards – cost = profits, and distributive justice. Homans' premise was rewards distributed in proportion to investments. Accordingly, Homans posited that the more rewards a person receives for an action, the more likely they will perform it (Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). Hence, under Homan's premise, the value of the reward in a social exchange equaled the reciprocating value of the exchange.

The seminal works of Blau further expanded Homans' work on the SET. Building on Homans' SET concepts, Blau (1964) expanded Homans' theoretical propositions by studying dyadic exchanges, exchanges between individuals rather than groups. Blau focused on mutually contingent, mutually rewarding actions contingent on rewarding others' reactions through exchange transactions (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). Key to Blau's work was the norm of reciprocity and the voluntary nature of the exchange. Additionally, Blau argued that parties in the exchange trust the other to discharge the reciprocating obligation within the reciprocal social exchange process. Thus, the lack of reciprocating contributions equated to a lack of trust. In contrast, Blau posited that reciprocation fostered a positive sentiment toward others, such as respect, another construct of the SET.

Emerson was the third seminal author to make significant contributions to the SET. Emerson (1976), extending Homans and Blau's works, viewed the SET as a frame of reference for a movement of value within the social exchange process (p. 359). Accordingly, Emerson's research addressed determinants of value in the goods and services in exchange, rewards, costs, commitment, and power within the context of the SET. In addition, his works focused on exchanges between individuals and groups.

Supporting Theories

Job Embeddedness Theory

Retaining seasoned employees is as much about why employees stay with an employer as why employees leave an employer. The job embeddedness theory provided that axis. Before the 21st century, employee retention and employee turnover researchers focused on why employees leave (Lee et al., 2018). However, Mitchell et al. (2001) made a paradigm shift and researched why people stayed and developed the job embeddedness theory (JE) (why employees stay theory). Fit, link, and sacrifice are the primary constructs underpinning the JE theory (Holtom et al., 2020). According to Holtom et al. (2020) and Mitchell et al. (2001), employees' perception of how they fit (a place they like and are comfortable) with their job, organization, and community; attachment to links (formal or informal ties to groups and people) in the community and the organization, and the sacrifices (material and psychological cost) to leave their jobs and to give up fit and link equated to job embeddedness.

In addition to providing a framework for studying why people stay, proponents of the JE theory advocated a broader scope of the utilization of the framework. Arguing that

job embeddedness was a better predictor of an employee's intent to leave and voluntary turnover than job satisfaction, job embeddedness theorists expanded the theory's utility to job performance (Lee et al., 2014; Rubenstein et al., 2019). Embeddedness researchers further expanded the literature on job embeddedness incorporating findings on on-the-job embeddedness and off-the-job embeddedness on turnover intentions, job performance, and organizational outcomes (Porter et al., 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2020). Accordingly, off-the-job embeddedness aided in predicting turnover, while on-the-job embeddedness aided in predicting job performance and organizational citizenship. Coetzer et al. (2017) job embeddedness study conducted in South Africa reflected findings consistent with embeddedness research. Thus, Coetzer et al.'s findings validated the job embeddedness theory's predictability utility across cultural contexts, nations, and institutions. Hence, JE theorists surmised that focusing on both the elements of off-the-job embeddedness and on-the-job embeddedness enhances the predictability of employee turnover, job performance, and organizational outcomes.

Other retention and turnover researchers have applied the expanded utility of the JE theory with other retention-related theories to explore retention strategies within a specific context. McEvoy and Henderson (2012), using the job embeddedness theory and the desirability of movement theory, conducted a qualitative study to explore why older employees continued to work past their retirement eligibility age. Employing a semi-structured interview methodology, McEvoy and Henderson collected data from 15 university employees (male and female) in the western state using a sampling technique. Data analysis yielded findings leading McEvoy and Henderson to conclude: (a)

autonomy, (b) flexible work schedule, (c) recognition, (d) competitive pay and benefits (insurance), and (e) positive social interaction contributed to employees' decision to work past the retirement eligibility age. Accordingly, retention initiatives that meet the needs of a retirement population might be perceived as a positive exchange, increase job embeddedness, and reduce retiree eligible employees' intent to leave.

The degree of sacrifice and the simplicity of moving from the job into retirement can impact the leave intention of retirement eligible employees. McEvoy and Henderson's (2012) findings supported this position and aligned with the embeddedness theory, which theorizes retention increases when employees have social linkages at work, feel their organization values their skills and abilities, and perceive significant sacrifices to leave the job supporting earlier embeddedness study findings. The study's findings also aligned with the desirability of movement theory, which theorizes that dissatisfied employees leave jobs when there is the ease of movement. Accordingly, McEvoy and Henderson's findings contribute to turnover and retention literature on retaining older employees whose departure from an organization results in a loss of valuable tacit knowledge. The implication of knowledge loss for managers is that it is beneficial for organizations to retain older and seasoned employees who significantly contribute to their productivity (Levallet & Chan, 2019; McEvoy & Henderson, 2012; Younge & Marx, 2016). Hence, managers should consider factors of on-the-job embeddedness, off-the-job embeddedness, and ease of movement when seeking strategies to retain employees who reach retirement eligibility age.

Leader Member Exchange Theory

A professional and academic literature review yielded retention research built on social exchange constructs that addressed the quality of exchanges between leaders and followers. Like the SET, the leader member exchange theory (LMX)'s central tenant is the quality of exchanges between individuals (Covella et al., 2017; Muldoon et al., 2018; Sarti, 2018). LMX interactions are dyadic exchanges between the leader and the member (subordinate employee). Constructs of LMX include high-quality exchanges and low-quality exchanges. Employees who receive high-quality exchanges from the leader experience frequent and quality engagement, get a better assignment, receive quality communication, are closer to the leader, and are considered part of the in-group.

In contrast, employees who experience low-quality exchanges with the leader experience inferior and less frequent engagements with the leader, inferior communication, a distant relationship with the leader, and are considered a part of the out-group individuals (Covella et al., 2017; Muldoon et al., 2018; Sarti, 2018; Seo et al., 2018). Consequently, low-quality leader member exchanges can contribute to higher intent to leave and increased turnover (Covella et al., 2017; Muldoon et al., 2018). Additionally, Rafiq et al. (2019) showed that positive work engagements equate to trust, which subsequently increases job embeddedness and reduces turnover intentions. Consequently, the quality of leader member exchanges impacts employee retention.

Other researchers have used leader-member exchange constructs to study exchanges between the organization and members. Covella et al.'s (2017) findings from their qualitative study examining the role of organizational behaviors on employee

turnover are consistent with other LMX findings. In Covella et al.'s study, leadership

behavior equated to organizational behavior as employees viewed leaders as the face of

the organization (Covella et al., 2017). The study's theoretical framework borrowed from

the SET and the leader-member exchange theory (LMX). Covella et al. collected data

using a survey constructed from multiple research instruments aligned with their

theoretical framework, including person-job fit, turnover intentions, and employee work

engagement. The rating scheme for the multiple-choice survey was a 7-point Likert scale.

The scale produced a Cronbach alpha reliability score between .86 and .93, exceeding the

minimum alpha of .70. The survey sample consisted of 402 people, with 205 male

participants responding and 196 females responding, all full-time employees in the

United States. Covella et al. (2017) noted that the research's overall findings provided

empirical evidence to support that positive exchanges between leaders and followers

reduce employee turnover, while healthy exchanges stimulate employee engagement,

which minimizes the likelihood that employees will seek to transfer to other agencies

(p.9). Likewise, Eberly et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study to examine the impact

of transformational leadership on followers after exposure to stress and trauma of

extreme events. Eberly et al. noted that transformational leaders focus on all followers,

consider their unique potential and individual needs, and provide training and

development opportunities accordingly. The study's findings supported that

transformational leadership positively correlated with follower retention after stress and

trauma from extreme events. In addition, the leader-member exchange's positive impact

on employee retention aligns with SET (Covella et al., 2017; Eberly et al., 2017). These

findings suggest that organizations should include initiatives to support positive leader-member engagement to enhance employee retention.

Initiatives improving leader-member exchanges are critical as the impact of exchanges with a member might impact the leave intention of other employees. Seo et al. (2018) examined the impact of leader-member exchange and turnover at the unit level, also referred to as a collective turnover, as collective turnover significantly impacts organizational performance and outcomes. In addition, the researchers examined turnover in the context of collective organizational commitment, a group's collective mindset. Seo et al. study's findings showed that low levels of LMX relations exchanges among a group of members negatively impact collective turnover. Thus, implications of the findings from Covella et al. (2017), Eberly et al. (2017), and Seo et al. (2018) are that improving midlevel managers' leadership growth and the quality of leader-member exchanges can improve the retention of talented employees.

Organizational Support Theory

The organizational support theory (OST) underpinnings are similar to the SET's underpinnings. OST builds on Blau's (1964) premise that voluntary favorable organizational treatment leads employees to believe their organization values and respects them (Bentley et al., 2019). As such, reciprocity and employees perceived organizational support (POS) drives employees' exchanges between the organization and its leaders, as employees see leaders as a representative of the organization (Lee & Jeung, 2018; Shanock et al., 2019; Sungu et al., 2019). Additionally, employees formulate their perception of POS through the lens of how much they believe the employer values their

contributions to the organization and how much the organization cares about the employee's wellbeing. Compensation, socio-emotional benefits from organizational links, trust, fairness (procedural justice and distributive justice), rewards, and leader-member exchanges are six attributes that contribute to employees' perception of organizational support (Kang & Sung, 2019; Shanock et al., 2019; Sungu et al., 2019). Hence, when employees perceive the organization's support, in exchange, the employee reciprocates by being more productive and increasing their citizenship behavior. Moreover, the high level of POS increases job satisfaction, increases organizational commitment, increases employee retention, and decreases employee absenteeism.

Although POS increases employee performance, performance ability dictates the degree of increased performance. Similarly, Sungu et al. (2019) examined the role of performance ability concerning perceived organizational support (POS) and affective organizational commitment (AOC) with job performance and job satisfaction, highlighting the role of performance ability in the social exchanges. Constructs from the SET were the underpinning of the research. Sungu et al. collected data from 269 employees (supervisor-subordinate dyads) from a University in Kenya. Based on the research findings, Sungu et al. concluded that POS directly increased employee job performance and AOC. They also noted that AOC mediated the relationship between perceived organizational support and job performance, whereas performance ability moderated the relationship between POS and job performance and AOC and job satisfaction. Nevertheless, correlations identified in the study were consistent with

previous POS and social exchange research, noting the positive impact on employee retention.

On the other hand, some studies noted contradicting retention findings. Afzal et al.'s (2019) findings differed as the findings showed that although employees' perceived supervisor support positively affected an employee's task performance. However, the findings did not support that employees' perceived supervisor support significantly impacted employee turnover intention. This contradiction presents opportunities for future research.

Contrasting Theories

Systems Theory

In systems, all parts are integral to the successful operation of the system. Grounded in the school of thought that things are interdependent in a systemic fashion where the sum of the parts equals the whole is the premise of systems theory (Peters, 2022). Thus, systems theory represents a holistic process. In a holistic approach, the elements of the organization comprise the sum of the organization. Integration is a crucial attribute of the systems school of thought as it is the integration that bonds the system and prevents it from breaking down as separate elements. In the systems school of thought, managers and vital interrelationships across the organization play critical roles in successful organizational outcomes (Iwu et al., 2016). The flow of interrelationships spans across the specialist functions of divisions.

A systemic approach looks at the whole situation and system around a phenomenon in a system. From an organizational perspective, system theorists posited

that an organization's interrelated and interdependent parts equal the organizational

system, supporting the need for a holistic approach (Iwu et al., 2016). Moreover, an

organization is an open system influenced by its environment. As an open system, an

organization has inputs from its resources, such as human capital. The human capital

work equates to throughputs that yield organizational outcomes, such as performance

outcomes. In addition, the system's feedback loop provides either negative or positive

feedback, with negative feedback indicating a problem. Thus, organizational leaders can

connect outputs to inputs, enabling an organization to connect the relationship of

constructs such as employee engagement, job satisfaction, commitment, organizational

outcome, and information regarding the relationship between them. Iwu et al. (2016) used

a systems theory lens in a quantitative study to measure and quantify the relationship

between strategic human resource outcomes and organizational outcomes. Based on the

research finding, Iwu et al. suggested that attitudinal human resource outcomes influence

performance at the system level. Hence, a system theorist approach to retention would be

a systemic, holistic problem-solving approach that might include multiple frameworks.

Job Characteristics Theory

Researchers investigating job satisfaction through the lens of meaningful work

and responsibilities focus on the attributes of the job. The job characteristic theory (JCT),

fashioned by organizational psychologists Hackman and Oldham to study employee job

satisfaction and motivation, has been used by researchers within the context of employee

turnover and retention (Demirkol & Nalla, 2018). With JCT steeped in job design and

person job-fit underpinnings rather than social exchanges, the premise of JCT is that

employees need to satisfy three psychological states (meaningful work, employee responsibility, and knowledge of results) that revolve around the nature of the job or job task delivering. Thus, job satisfaction and employee motivation require the presence of all three psychological states.

Core job dimensions are critical to reaching the psychological state. The five core job dimensions of skills variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback induce psychological states (Demirkol & Nalla, 2018). Skill variety involves employees working on different tasks requiring different skills. Task identity encompasses a well-defined task an employee can complete from the beginning to the end of the task. Task significance is the meaningfulness of the work. Work that is meaningful to the organization and others is meaningful to the employee. Autonomy entails the scope of the authority vested in the employee to make decisions and control the work. The final construct, feedback, entails the employee receiving feedback during task performance and outcomes. However, within the JCT literature, researchers posited that the JCT model might not apply to employees who do not desire jobs with high level core task characteristics. In contrast, some researchers have conducted turnover and retention studies using job characteristics through a norm of reciprocity lens (Ahmad, 2018). Although JCT considers task and autonomy, the overarching framework does not align well with the SET.

Employee Retention

Employee retention themes are fundamental to developing successful retention strategies. Hence, retention researchers focus on what makes employees stay to develop

and implement strategies that successfully retain valuable employees (Pasko et al., 2021; Rombaut & Guerry, 2020). Current research continues to yield these common themes in conceptual frameworks proposed to explore the relationship between career development and training, advancement, organizational performance and outcomes, work-life balance, talent and knowledge management, corporate social responsibility, virtual work environments, and employee retention (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Lee & Chen, 2018; Rombaut & Guerry, 2020). These common themes addressed across the retention literature are crucial to identifying successful strategies for retaining top talent.

When managers do not retain top talent, organizational gaps occur that impact performance. The gaps increase employees' workload, decrease employee morale, and decrease the organization's internal talent pool (Ketkaew et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2018). In addition, a decrease in the talent pool creates a gap in skills that ultimately impacts an organization's performance and financial growth (Lee et al., 2018). Consequently, failure to retain top talent can have a significant negative impact on an organization's growth.

Research targeting specific attributes of employees can identify factors specific to the attributes to guide an organization's retention strategies. Letchmiah and Thomas (2017) conducted a qualitative case study to identify factors that positively impact high potential employee retention. Letchmiah and Thomas interviewed eleven high potential senior employees from one organization using open-ended questions to explore retention strategies for high potential employees. Letchmiah and Thomas's research findings suggested that leadership and organizational culture, organizational purpose, developmental opportunities, meaningful work, and collegiality positively impact the

retention of high potential employees. Similarly, George's (2015) quantitative study investigating factors contributing to professional employees' retention identified eight primary factors garnered from the literature. The organizational level's primary factors included management, a conducive environment, social support, and development opportunities, while at the job level, autonomy, compensation, crafted/sculpted workload, and work-life balance. In addition, George used 19 factors to develop a Likert scale questionnaire electronically administered to 138 male and female professional workers in various job roles from one multinational company located in the United Kingdom. Based on research findings, George concluded that although 18 of the 19 subfactors impacted an employee's intention to stay with an organization, organizational level factors were more likely to predict an employee's intent to stay with an organization. Targeted research identifying high-performing employees' desire for collegiality, what works best at the organizational level, and the job level can result in enhanced retention strategies.

The workforce comprises employees that span multiple generations; as such, generational differences are another workgroup attribute contributing to the retention literature. Focusing on generational differences in retention strategies, Naim and Lenka (2018) aimed their retention study at developing a conceptual framework for attracting and retaining Generation Y employees in the context of the SET. Using a constructivist approach, Naim and Lenka reviewed relevant literature and constructed a conceptual framework using the development, commitment, and retention of Generation Y employees. The study's findings indicated that mentoring, strategic leadership, social media, and knowledge sharing fostered competency development. Subsequently,

competency development has a positive impact on the affective commitment of Generation Y, which results in Generation Y's intent to stay with an organization. Retention researchers also noted that younger workers value job security, compensation, advancement, and recognition (Pasko et al., 2021; Rombaut & Guerry, 2020). Thus, incorporating these constructs in an organization's retention strategy is beneficial to retaining younger employees.

Central Concepts and Themes

Retention and Voluntary Employee Turnover

Exploring the professional and academic literature on employee retention and turnover is critical to improving employee retention. Turnover researchers seek a better understanding of why employees voluntarily leave, also known as voluntary employee turnover (Corbin, 2020). Thus, understanding voluntary employee turnover is crucial to gaining a better understanding of successful retention strategies. The themes and central concepts identified involuntary turnover research should align with retention strategies. Moreover, turnover research findings correlate with retention research as turnover research focuses on why employees leave, and retention research focuses on strategies to mitigate employees' intent to leave and voluntary turnover rates (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2017; Covella et al., 2017). Some researchers combine turnover and retention studies focusing on employee turnover and retention strategies (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2017). Employee retention and employee turnover are so closely aligned that failing to access the literature on both limit knowledge gained from the literature review.

Retention and turnover literature contain a broad continuum of related concepts. A large percentage of the research identifies themes of instability of management in the organization, poor working conditions, poor leadership, poor employee engagement, insufficient training and development, low salary, job fit, the lack of family-friendly programs, the lack of fairness and rewards, and the perceived opportunities for employment elsewhere as contributing to turnover risk and low retention rates (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2017; Luna-Arocas et al., 2020; Wang & Brower, 2019). Retention and turnover researchers' findings have shown that recruiting suitable employees, effective leadership, training and development, job satisfaction, organizational culture, and balancing work and family life are all areas managers must address to implement successful retention strategies to reduce turnover and retain valuable employees.

Career Development and Advancement

Retention research often yields universal central themes. Career development and advancement are two universal repeating themes in retention research (DeMotta et al., 2019; Ohunakin et al., 2020). Researchers have shown a substantial relationship between career advancement, development and training, employee engagement, performance management, competency mapping, and retaining top talent (Corbin, 2020; Harden et al., 2018). Retention researchers concluded that training and developing employees, identifying employees' knowledge gaps, and implementing initiatives to enhance competencies increase employee retention, adding value to the employee and the organization (DeMotta et al., 2019; Ju & Li, 2019). Likewise, employee development increases employee trust and loyalty and organizational productivity. It also is a work

attribute that increases employee retention across industries and generations (Pasko et al., 2021). Hence, managers investing in career development and employee advancement initiatives can create a win-win scenario for the employee and the organization.

In addition to being a universal theme in retention research, career development and career advancement themes align with social exchange constructs. Harden et al.'s (2018) findings support the significance of training and development in retaining top talent. Harden et al.'s quantitative study using constructs from the SET examined the relationship between turnover intentions, organizational commitment (loyalty and attachment), and constructs important to professional IT employees such as perceived work overload, fairness, and reward. Harden et al. collected data using an online survey and measured responses using a 7-point Likert scale. Participants consisted of 27 federal employees from a U.S. federal agency task force. Their study's findings confirmed that perceived work overload, fairness, and reward influenced organizational commitment. These constructs are common themes in retention research and the SET.

Furthermore, the constructs of perceived work overload, perceived work obsolescence, and fairness of rewards aligned with the constructs of the SET (members engaging in behaviors motivated by perceived reciprocity from the leader/organization). For example, Harden et al. (2018) noted that when organizations did not provide sufficient training and development, IT professionals deemed their skills obsolete and insufficient to fulfill career goals, their level of organizational commitment decreased, and their leave intentions increased. Hence, the employees increase exchange and reciprocity of organizational commitment as a result of the organization providing

training and career advancement opportunities. However, other retention studies yielded contradicting findings. Guo et al.'s (2014) study on the relationship between retention, promotion trends, and the acquisition of workforce quality yielded different results. Guo et al. investigated whether the Department of Defense (DoD) retains higher-quality DoD acquisition workforce civilians at a higher rate than lower-quality DoD acquisition workforce civilians. Guo et al. examined the quality metrics of the DoD acquisition workforce and explored if personnel retention and career advancement varied by quality. The researchers also explored the relationships between quality and retention to determine differences between segments of the acquisition workforce, such as services, agencies, career fields, and pay plans. In addition, Guo et al. examined personnel quality (productivity) from the perspective of education and performance ratings. The researchers also assessed the characteristics of employees rising to the senior executive service (the highest levels of DoD) in the acquisition workforce and if the AcqDemo (a pay band pay plan which enables high performing employees to reach higher pay levels more rapidly than the general schedule -GS) pay plan impacts retention. Based on the research findings, Guo et al. noted that higher average performance ratings were associated with lower retention rates, and the higher the pay grade of the employee, the more significant the negative impact on retention. As for the measure of education, retention was higher for employees who entered the workforce with a bachelor's or master's degree than those who entered with less than a bachelor's degree. In addition, the findings showed no significant difference between those who entered with a Ph.D. versus a bachelor's degree. However, those with a bachelor's degree or above were more likely

to stay. Additionally, individuals who obtained their degrees in the workforce had lower separation rates.

Organizational Culture/Environment

Organizational culture is a prominent theme in retention and turnover research and plays a vital role in employees' leave intent. The culture is significant as fairness and justice, respect, communication, family-friendly programs, ethical behavior, and organizational support are all aspects that define an organization's culture (Nowrouzi-Kia & Fox, 2020; Ristino & Michalak's, 2018). Retention research shows a significant statistical relationship between an employee's work environment and employee retention (Holzwarth et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2021). Negative perceptions of these elements contribute to employees' intent to leave and employee turnover. Through the lens of SET constructs, an employee's negative perception of the organization's culture negatively impacts employee social exchanges and retention (Kundu & Lata, 2017; Ristino & Michalak, 2018). Managers should consider a positive organizational culture as tantamount to employee retention and organizational performance.

Communication in an organization is meaningful as it generates inclusiveness and trust. Holzwarth et al. (2021) noted that organizational communication engenders relational cohesion and affective commitment, reducing turnover intentions. Holzwarth et al. found that both horizontal (supervisory/leader-member communication) and vertical (organizational level communication) impact employee retention as employees perceives cooperation (collaboration) in the form of communication as rewarding. Holzwart et al. concluded that when managers engage in honest, direct communication with employees,

include employees in the decision-making processes, keep employees informed of organizational strategies and goals, affective organizational commitment increases, and leave intention decreases. The finding implies that communicating with employees at the organizational and job levels is a vital retention element.

Researchers found that organizational culture/environment impacts retention and aids in predicting turnover. Kundu and Lata (2017) and Ristino and Michalak's (2018) study also supported organization culture/environments as a potential theme in retention research. Kundu and Lata's quantitative cross-sectional study assessed the mediating role of organizational engagement in the relationship between a supportive work environment and employee retention. Kundu and Lata gathered data using a questionnaire distributed to 211 participants from private and public organizations in the service and manufacturing industry. Participants consisted of multinational companies and Indian organizations. The study's findings indicated that a supportive work environment (SWE) was significantly related to employee retention. Although employee engagement aids in mitigating the impact, SWE aids in predicting employees' leave intentions. The framework guiding the study contained constructs from the SET and the employer-employee relationship concept. Perceived work environment climate, supervisory relationship, peer group interaction, and perceived organizational support were constructs of the framework. These findings align with the SET as the dimensions align with exchange and reciprocal behaviors. Moreover, the findings showed that adequate supervisory support, positive peer relationships, and organizational support increased employee retention rates.

Research indicates the other organizational elements can influence an employee's perception of the organization's culture/environment. Ristino and Michalak's (2018) qualitative study using a phenomenological research design explored the influence of organizational culture on employee perception. The phenomenological design aided the researchers in describing, analyzing, and making sense of verbatim participants' accounts of human experiences. They selected participants using snowball sampling and collected data using surveys. The sample consisted of 20 full-time employees from Eastern European-based companies. Ristino and Michalak's research findings suggested that organizational practices, the cultural dimension of values, and fundamental beliefs influence employees' perceptions of their organization. These sub-themes can be blended with more prominent themes, such as trust.

Work-life Balance

Work-life balance is a common theme in employee retention. Retention researchers' findings confirmed that flexible work environments reduce employee turnover and positively affect organizational profitability (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2017; Berkery et al., 2020; McEvoy & Henderson, 2012). Flexible work environments such as alternative work schedules offering a 40-hour workweek in a 10-hour day work schedule enable employees to have 3 days off every week. Likewise, flexing the number of hours worked each day of the 40-hour workweek and every other Friday off work schedule and teleworking affords employee discretion that improves their ability to balance work and family or work and school. In addition to improving retention through work-life balance opportunities, retention researchers posited that flexible work schedules also contribute to

perceived organizational support (Berkery et al., 2020). Moreover, researchers found that similar strategies effectively retain older workers and millennials, as millennials also value work-life balance (Pasko et al., 2021). Managers should consider implementing work-life balance retention initiatives as it benefits employees across generations, reduces retention, and increases the organization's bottom line.

Other research reflects that family-friendly programs like flextime significantly benefit employee retention and organizational profitability. Berkery et al. (2020) examined the relationship between flex-time and the organizational outcomes of profitability, absenteeism, and turnover across 1,064 private sector organizations and seven countries (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). Theoretical constructs from the SET guided the research. Although their research did not establish a significant relationship between flextime and absenteeism, their research yielded that flextime had a significant negative relationship with employee turnover and a significant positive relationship with organizational profitability. Thus, flextime is a strategy that can yield significant returns for an organization, one of which is higher retention rates.

Likewise, researchers also identified other family-friendly work programs that benefit the employee and organization. Family-friendly programs such as alternative work schedules improve employee retention and organizational performance (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2017; Berkery et al., 2020). Yu's (2019) study yielded similar findings. Yu explored critical reasons for employees' turnover intentions and identified family-friendly policies that reduce employees' intent to leave the organization through the lens of the

SET. Using sampling, Yu collected data via an online survey containing quantitative and qualitative questions emailed to the work accounts of 1,111 federal female law enforcement officers employed by the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Participants included single, married, divorced, and women residing with partners ranging in age from 26–59 years old, either with or without children. Data analysis revealed that women with children favored family-friendly policies that supported child-care initiatives, while single mothers favored flexible work initiatives, mainly part-time employment. Identifying subthemes under the theme of work-life balance can result in targeted retention initiatives that meet the needs of a larger workgroup.

Older workers are another workgroup that might benefit from customized family-friendly work. Butler (2020) noted that older workers benefit from family-friendly programs that offer work pattern changes as the flexibility in their work schedule or the ability to work part-time allows them to care for aging family members. Furthermore, Butler noted that combining the flexible work schedule with tailored work benefits packages can keep older employees on the job mitigating the exit of talent and experience older workers possess because of years of training, development, and exposure to institutional knowledge. Accordingly, family-friendly programs are a strategy that can yield significant returns for the employee and the organization while increasing employee retention.

Organizational Performance and Outcomes

The foundation of an organization's performance and outcomes are the employee's talents, skills, and knowledge. Retaining talented and skilled employees is

critical to organizational performance and outcomes (Afzal et al., 2019). In the context of social exchanges and employee retention, researchers posited that employee engagement, job satisfaction, and communication impact employee retention and organizational performance and outcomes (Keller et al., 2020; Kloutsiniotis & Mihail, 2017; Kontoghiorghes, 2016). Furthermore, when skilled and talented employees leave an organization, their tacit knowledge and formal institutional knowledge go with them (Muthuveloo et al., 2017). Hence, organizations lose top talent, skills, and organizational knowledge when the organization fails to retain these employees. In addition, organizational performance declines, and expenses increase.

Empirical evidence supports the significant relationship between employee knowledge and organizational performance. Muthuveloo et al. (2017) studied the impact of tacit knowledge management on organizational performance. First, the researchers gathered data using questionnaires aligned with the four dimensions (socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization) of fundamental knowledge creation. Then, they distributed the self-administered questionnaires to 108 managers, senior managers, and directors from manufacturing organizations in Malaysia and identified in the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers. Finally, Muthuveloo et al. analyzed data using SPSS 21 software. The study's findings reflected that tacit knowledge had a significant impact on organizational performance, particularly the knowledge creation dimensions of socialization (the process of creating new tacit knowledge through socialization) and internalization (a process that converts explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge when employees apply explicit knowledge to practical situations, and it

becomes the basis for routine). Accordingly, when talented employees leave, they take their experience, knowledge, and opportunities for knowledge sharing.

An employee's tacit knowledge is a valuable asset in an organization. Muthuveloo et al. (2017) concluded that tacit knowledge is essential to an individual's superior performance and, ultimately, an organization's superior performance. Moreover, the findings showed that tacit knowledge is a resource that is critical to an organization's successful performance and competitive advantage as it enhances organizational performance. Hence, Muthuveloo et al. posited that the organization's human capital's tacit knowledge is more valuable than financial capital. Accordingly, managers should invest in retention strategies to retain employees with superior tacit knowledge and invest in knowledge transfer practices.

Other research yielded findings supporting the criticality of an organization's performance and retaining talented employees. Kloutsiniotis and Mihail's (2017) and Kontoghiorghes's (2016) studies also supported the need for managers to implement sound retention strategies that retain top talent that improve organizational performance and outcomes. Kloutsiniotis and Mihail examined the relationship between employee engagement, job satisfaction, and high-performance work systems (HPWS) with a mediating factor of employees' affective commitment and intent to leave. Kloutsiniotis and Mihail (2017) noted that an HPWS combines human resource practices, work structures, and processes that maximize employees' knowledge, skill, commitment, and flexibility (p.35). Kloutsiniotis and Mihail used questionnaires to collect data from 296 male and female clinicians comprised of doctors and nurses from five private and two

public hospitals in Athens and Thessaloniki, Greece. The study's findings reflected that HPWS significantly impacted employee job satisfaction, affective commitment, and employee engagement and negatively affected employees' intention to leave. Accordingly, engaged and satisfied employees are more committed to the organization and have lower leave intentions.

Moreover, retaining talented employees helps build and sustain higher levels of organizational performance. Kontoghiorghes (2016) two-phased study examined the relationship between talent attraction, retention, and high-performance culture and explored the relationship between employee attitudes of motivation, satisfaction, and commitment. Based on the findings, Kontoghiorghes suggested that high-performance cultures were highly conducive to effective talent management and retention. Thus, managers need to retain top talent to grow and maintain high-performing organizations.

Talent and Knowledge Management

Failing to retain talented employees can disrupt an organization's performance. When talented employees leave, an organization loses valuable skills and knowledge (Lee et al., 2018; Narayanan et al., 2019). The decrease in skills and knowledge leads to a decrease in the organization's efficiency and performance, leading to customer dissatisfaction and losing customers, which equates to a loss in revenue. Additionally, recruiting, hiring, and training a new employee exceeds the annual salary cost by 200% (Corbin, 2020; Lee et al., 2018). Research has shown that retention is a critical aspect of talent management and essential to maximizing organizational performance (Corbin,

2020). Thus, retaining talented employees can sustain an organization's efficiency, performance, and bottom line.

Furthermore, losing top talent reduces the talent pool and creates a gap in skills, negatively impacting organizational performance and growth. Massingham's 2018 study yielded findings consistent with Lee et al. (2018). Massingham conducted a longitudinal empirical case study to identify strategies for measuring the impact of knowledge loss when employees leave an agency. Guided by the underpinnings of a critical realism philosophy, Massingham gathered data via an annual survey, training workshops, and other related activities from 118 engineer and technical type participants. Findings from his qualitative research indicated that knowledge lost when knowledgeable employees leave results in capability gaps, low productivity, decreased quality of work, overworked employees, and low employee morale. Massingham identified five knowledge loss concepts, including, but not limited to, knowledge resources and organizational problems, to help understand the impact of knowledge loss on an agency. His findings added to existing research that addressed employees who remained (survivors), subject matter experts (tacit knowledge/expertise), and organizational capability by providing measurable constructs to understand better the impact of low retention rates and associated knowledge loss. Consequently, even an organizational strategy to retain and transfer organizational knowledge when employees retire or resign cannot capture the expertise of a talented employee.

Corporate Social Responsibility

In alignment with the SET premise of positive engagements producing positive outcomes, retention theorists investigated the relationship between employee engagement, job satisfaction, retention, and an organization's responsiveness to social needs. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) or social responsibility relates to behavior and actions that positively impact society; at a minimum, it is doing no harm to society (Baldarelli & Gigli, 2014). Researchers have identified a positive relationship between CSR, employee engagement, job satisfaction, employee retention, and an employee's perception of an organization (Lee & Chen, 2018; Santhosh & Baral, 2015). Employees perceive their organization's engagement in CSR activities as having a good brand as they care about the wellbeing of others. Santhosh and Baral (2015) noted that CSR initiatives contribute to positive employee attitudes and behaviors that manifest as increased affective commitment, job engagement, and organizational citizenship behavior. Lee and Chen (2018) posited that the CSR of an organization could aid in retaining top talent as CRS initiatives might fulfill employees' job needs of existence, relatedness, and growth. Thus, an organization's CSR initiatives might increase employees' job satisfaction and retention. The academic literature supports that organizations implementing CSR initiatives improve employer-employee relations, attract top talent, improve relations with stakeholders, increase employee retention rate, and improve overall organizational performance (Baldarelli & Gigli, 2014). Accordingly, leaders might leverage CSR initiatives to improve employee engagement, job satisfaction, employee retention, and the perception and reputation of an organization, all of which drive organizational efficiency.

Thus, integrating CSR initiatives with organizational strategies can retain top talents and create a competitive edge for the business.

Virtual Work Environments

As virtual work environments gain popularity, social exchange theorists are assessing the implications of social exchanges in the context of a virtual work environment. In March 2020, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and resulting Shelter in Place executive orders and declarations issued by governments forced public and private organizations, both large and small, domestic and international, to pivot to a virtual work environment for approximately 12 to 18 months (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). The pandemic escalated the formation of a new era workplace, a virtual work environment. As more organizations have implemented virtual work environments, retention and social exchange researchers are reassessing the relevancy of social exchanges in the context of virtual work environments. Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018) assessed SET's relevancy in the new era workplace of a virtual and highly technological environment. Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu assessed exchanges considering telework and virtual relationships and joint employee efforts that create interactions at the same level (e.g., manager to manager). The focus was on interactions at the same level. Thus, the researchers negated the SET constructs of power and status. The researchers also included digitization (technology) in their model, which replaced some human interaction. Based on their findings, Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu concluded that virtual work environments impacted the traditional theoretical framework of SET and posited the need for adjustments in the theoretical framework of SET. Yarberry and Sims (2021)

noted that the new era of virtual work environments also necessitates that managers rethink employee training and career development strategies. With the growth of virtual work environments and digitalization changing social exchanges in the workplace, managers should consider findings such as Yarberry and Sims when reevaluating their retention strategies.

Transition

In Section 1, I provided a basis and justification for this study. The discussion included the background of the problem, the business problem, and the purpose statement. Also addressed in Section 1 was the nature of the study and the justification of a qualitative research method and single case study research design. Additionally, I stated the research problem, listed the semistructured interview questions, identified the conceptual framework, and discussed the significance. I concluded Section 1 with a review of the professional and academic literature. I addressed the SET's underpinnings and seminal authors' contributions to advance the SET. In my review, I also discussed supporting and contrasting theories and themes from peer-reviewed retention and turnover research literature.

In Section 2, I focus on the research plan to accomplish my research in Section 1. A restatement of the purpose statement is given. Also discussed are the researcher's role as the primary data collection instrument, participant eligibility criteria, an in-depth justification of the research method and design, selection of the participants, and an overview of ethical research. Section 2 ends with a focus on the research data. Data

collection instruments and techniques, data organization, data analysis, and reliability and validity (the research's usefulness and trustworthiness) are addressed.

Section 3 consists of a discussion of the research findings. Also, in Section 3, I present the research findings, applications of the findings to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for future research. Finally, section 3 closes with a discussion on reflections and the conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative explorative single case study was to discover strategies midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees. The target population consisted of midlevel federal acquisition managers from a federal acquisition organization in the southeastern United States who have developed strategies to retain seasoned acquisition employees. This study might contribute to social change by increasing employee job satisfaction and improving federal support services provided locally, nationally, and internationally.

Role of the Researcher

The role of a qualitative researcher is to gain an in-depth and extensive understanding of participants' experiences within the context of the issues based on the participants' interpretation (Marshall et al., 2021). In that the researcher is the greatest threat to the quality and fidelity of the research, at every stage of the research process, the researcher should operate under the tenants of ethical deportment, transparency, and unbiased generation and collection of data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). As the researcher in this case study, I adhered to these research qualities as I was the primary data collection instrument.

Towards transparency, I acknowledged that my current career field is in federal acquisitions as a contract specialist and contracting officer. Hence, there is a relationship between the topic, research area, and me as the researcher. I endeavored to remain unbiased in my interview and focus group. Furthermore, I strove to ensure that my

employment as a federal acquisition contracting officer did not result in any biased

researcher's assessment.

The researcher's role also includes adhering to ethical research standards (Anabo

et al., 2019; Cortina, 2020). Following the guiding principles of the National Commission

for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979)

Belmont Report contributed to my ethical deportment and transparency in the data

collection process. *The Belmont Report*, which serves to protect participants in research

studies, provides guiding principles for the ethical treatment of research participants

(Anabo et al., 2019; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and

Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Accordingly, when conducting my study, I

adhered to the Belmont Report's guiding principles of autonomous informed consent and

do no harm. Informed consent requires that researchers inform participants of the purpose

of the study, the procedures of the study, the potential risk involved, and the voluntary

nature of participation (Anabo et al., 2019). As such, I ensured that I communicated this

information in a manner that potential participants could comprehend well enough to

make an independent, educated decision about whether to participate in the study or not.

Participants acknowledged this by reading, understanding, and responding to "I Consent"

via email. I secured all audio recorded data, transcripts, and consent forms in a locked

safe and will retain them for 5 years.

In addition, as the researcher, I designed my interview protocol (see Appendix A)

to facilitate the collection of rich data and to obtain informed consent. I used

semistructured interviews to generate data as semistructured interviews are appropriate

for asking "what" and "how" questions that lead to a better understanding of retention strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned federal contract specialists. Semistructured interviews also reduce the possibility of bias as researchers using semistructured interviews pose the same open-ended targeted questions to interviewees (Belotto, 2018; Rowley, 2012). Accordingly, using the same targeted questions for interviewees aided in mitigating bias. In addition, I used probing questions to ascertain additional depth as well as to clarify ambiguity. Finally, I concluded interviews with a wrap-up question that I designed to enable participants to share additional information they deemed appropriate.

Finally, I used reflexivity to remain objective and used an audio-visual recording for interviews. Through member checking, researchers allow interviewees to review summaries of the researcher's interpretation of their responses, enhancing the credibility of qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Thus, I used member checking to allow the interviewee to review my interpretation to ensure accuracy and reflect authenticity in the participants' voices.

Participants

In my study, I explored successful strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned employees. In alignment with the purpose of my study and my research question, the eligible participants for my semistructured interviews consisted of federal midlevel acquisition managers currently performing managerial duties within the acquisition division of a federal agency in the southeastern United States who have developed strategies to retain seasoned acquisition employees. In

addition, I used a secondary population consisting of employees of midlevel federal acquisition managers to participate in a focus group. Likewise, my secondary focus group participants' eligibility criteria consisted of contract specialists supervised by midlevel federal acquisitions managers within the same acquisition division in a federal agency.

Currently employed as a Contracting Officer in a federal acquisition division, my affiliation and familiarity with the field of federal acquisitions aided in my access to participants. I contacted the organization's human resources department, legal department, and senior leaders to gain approval for access. After gaining approval, I coordinated participant access with midlevel leaders in acquisitions. Collaborating with the midlevel leaders, I presented a brief overview of my proposed research during the agency's staff meetings and provided contact information that facilitated interested parties meeting participant eligibility criteria contacting me by email for additional information. I pulled my sample population and initiated contact through email.

To establish and cultivate a working relationship with participants, I focused on the participant's best interests in every study stage. I responded to participants' questions honestly. In addition, I listened intently to the participants. Furthermore, planning, preparation, note-taking, listening skills, and patients were essential to collecting rich data during the interview process, as the researchers conducting interviews aid in the interviewee's cooperation (Marshall et al., 2021). To further foster a working relationship with participants, when sharing the purpose of my study with participants, I was honest and transparent and informed them of the confidentiality that would provide and ultimately did provide and their ability to revoke their consent and opt-out of the study.

Research Method and Design

There are various research methodologies and designs that researchers use to conduct research. However, a researcher's chosen method and design should be a method and design that best facilitates an answer to the research question guiding the purpose of the study (Bansal et al., 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For example, researchers examining relationships would employ a different methodology from researchers seeking a deeper understanding of a contemporary phenomenon. Likewise, the chosen research design should align with the research question and methodology.

Research Method

Researchers employ a quantitative, qualitative, or mix-method methodology to research the answer to their research question. Using closed-ended questions, quantitative researchers seek to explain by testing hypotheses (Yin, 2018). Quantitative researchers, focusing on numerical data and measurable variables, draw conclusions based on numerical data driven, statistically significant results that reflect the levels and distribution between and among variables researched (Bleiker et al., 2019). Researchers use the resulting levels and distribution of variables to generate findings as to the probability of relationships and causality. I did not test hypotheses to examine relationships or causality among dependent and independent variables in my study. Therefore, a quantitative method was not appropriate for this study. Mixed-methods researchers employ quantitative and qualitative research techniques and approaches to collect and analyze data (Yin, 2018). A mixed method was not appropriate as I did not employ any quantitative methods to conduct my study. Comparatively, using open-ended

questions, qualitative researchers seek to identify strategies to solve a business problem by exploring and understanding the meaning of an issue within its context (Yin, 2018).

Additionally, the ontological philosophy of reality and truth (the sense and meaning that one makes of interactions) and the epistemological philosophy of the study of knowledge undergirding qualitative research aid researchers in collecting rich data to gain a better understanding of the issue within its context. In summation, in qualitative research, the ontological and epistemological philosophy is that knowledge construction establishes and perpetuates social relations that individuals use to define the reality of their experience within its context (Bleiker et al., 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Hence, a qualitative research approach supports exploring a business problem to gain in-depth insight into how individuals interpret and make sense of and meaning of their experiences. Accordingly, I used a qualitative method to ask participants open-ended questions to discover strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees. As such, a qualitative method was appropriate for my study.

Research Design

For my study, I considered the following designs: (a) focus groups, (b) phenomenology, (c) miniethnography, and (d) explorative single case study. Researchers employ a focus group design to collect data through informal groups about their perception of ideas and thoughts, and to assess consumers' attitudes and opinions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). Focus groups are moderated by the researcher and consist of group interviews with 4 to 12 participants that share characteristics

relevant to the research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By employing a focus group design, researchers can gather a wider variety of information in a shorter period of time. In contrast, a focus group setting negates participants' confidentiality, which could limit participants' disclosure of rich, in-depth data and contribute to group conformance.

Additionally, using only a focus group design for my primary population would not support the one-on-one interaction between the researcher and the participant that would generate rich, in-depth personal data of the individual's personal experiences and the meaning of those experiences with uninterrupted probing questions (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Accordingly, a focus group design alone was not the best choice for my primary research design as the group setting could have limited the in-depth data collection. However, a focus group data collection instrument was appropriate for a secondary population as the focus group interview enhanced the breadth of data generated and collected. Furthermore, through dialogue and debate, participants in the focus group can stimulate interaction and information from other group members with shared characteristics within the context of the issue studied (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Xerri, 2018). Thus, a focus group setting supported focus group participants' stimulation of information between group members as they interacted with me and other group participants.

Phenomenological researchers focus on a specific lived experience of persons to capture the essence of the lived experience and transform the experience into a textual experience (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological design aids the researcher in describing, analyzing, and making sense of the participant's accounts of human

experiences as phenomenological researchers obtain descriptions from participants and then ask questions to elicit meaning (Moustakas, 1994). However, the phenomenological interviews are long and require that the researcher commits to more preparation and interview time and has more skills to ascertain the description and meaning of the participants' lived experiences. In my study, I did not focus on a specific lived experience. Therefore, phenomenology was not an optimal selection.

Miniethnography researchers focus on a narrow area of inquiry and seek an understanding of a culture's norms, values, and roles as remembered by participants through direct interaction with and observation of the culture of a particular group (Fusch et al., 2017; Wolcott, 2008). Wolcott (2008) posited that an ethnographic research design is ideal for studying the cultural particularism of a group of people to attain rich descriptions of cultural aspects and norms. However, the objective of my study is not to describe and understand the cultural norms, values, and workplace roles of the organizational culture. Hence, a miniethnography design was not the best approach for my study. Instead, my objective was to collect in depth, rich data from midlevel federal acquisition managers within the context of a federal contracting acquisition agency to better understand retention strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees.

Case study researchers conduct research within a bounded case to study a real-world phenomenon within the context of the case (Yin, 2018). Case study researchers use the bounded case to establish the scope of data collection. Additionally, a case study is appropriate for exploring phenomena within the real-life context in which they occurred.

Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that the purpose of exploratory case studies is to understand and gain insight into a phenomenon. Accordingly, an explorative single case study was appropriate to identify midlevel federal acquisition managers' strategies to retain seasoned acquisition employees.

Moreover, a qualitative case study supports the use of multiple data sources. Thus, qualitative case study researchers employ multiple data sources to achieve data saturation, which contributes to the rigor and validity of the research (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Researchers achieve data saturation when the researchers' data collection efforts yield no new data. Hence, the researcher cannot identify new coding or themes, and there is sufficient information to replicate the study. Furthermore, using more than one data source supports methodological triangulation and can speed up the time and sample size required to achieve data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Xerri, 2018).

I used methodological triangulation and achieved data saturation in my study. Methodological triangulation, frequently confused with data triangulation, consists of the researcher using multiple sources of data such as focus groups, interviews, document analysis, and observation (Fusch et al., 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Data collection methods that I used in my methodological approach include: (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews, (b) focus groups, (c) company document analysis, and (d) reflective journaling. Methodological triangulation supports data saturation as using more than one method to collect data enables qualitative researchers to explore the problem from different methodological perspectives and to

extrapolate the meaning of participants' experiences from the multiple data sources

(Fusch et al., 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As such, triangulation supporting data

saturation occurs when the multiple data collection sources produce a point where the

data findings converge, creating a triangulation where the sources yield the same or very

similar findings, making the research more credible through convergence and data

saturation (Abdalla et al., 2018).

Population and Sampling

Population

My research question was: What strategies do midlevel federal acquisition

managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees? Furthermore, the population

inclusion criteria, the strategy for identifying participants, the sample size in the study,

and the strategy to recruit participants were all integral to selecting the participant

population (Blaikie, 2018; Mthuli et al., 2022). Thus, the population and the sampling

method for my qualitative case study were appropriate to facilitate rich data to answer the

research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Sampling Method

Similar to the population inclusion criteria, the sampling method is a critical

component of qualitative research that entails selecting a research situation, context, and

participants that provide rich data to answer the research question (Moser & Korstjens,

2018). The sampling strategy must align with the research method, produce a sample

representing the eligible population in the bound case, and possess knowledge of the

study phenomenon (Mthuli et al., 2022; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Thus, I only

considered qualitative sampling strategies for my case study. Qualitative sampling approaches considered include: (a) convenience sampling, (b) quota sampling, (c) snowball sampling, and (d) purposive sampling (Marshall et al., 2021; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Convenience sampling is selecting readily available participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Moser & Korstjens). Convenience sampling is the least scientific sampling method as participants might not be directly involved in the issues the researcher will study, limiting the researcher's ability to collect rich, in-depth data. Thus, convenience sampling was not the most appropriate sampling approach for my study. Quota sampling uses categories with a minimum number of participants in each category to ensure that key categories/groups are represented in the sample (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Quota sampling also facilitates comparisons. Quota sampling was not appropriate for my study as my study does not contain multiple key groups, nor did I make comparisons in my study. In snowball sampling, eligible participants identify and refer other participants who are well informed about the issue of study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Snowball sampling was not the optimal sample approach for my study as the participant might not know all eligible participants or might favor participants identified over other participants. Purposive sampling entails the purposeful recruitment of relevant participants that will be most informative in the data collection process and enhance the credibility of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Sample Size

A small sample size, selected using purposive sampling, was sufficient to support

data collection for my qualitative case study. Rowley (2012) noted that it is appropriate to

have six to eight participants in a case study using semistructured interviews as its

primary data collection method. Moreover, a small sample size is typical in qualitative

research and can be sufficient as depth rather than breadth is important when the

researcher seeks to better understand the issue studied (Barrett & Twycross, 2018;

Hammarberg et al., 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Accordingly, I used purposive

sampling to select six midlevel federal acquisition managers from a federal acquisition

organization in the southeastern United States who have developed strategies to retain

seasoned acquisition employees. Likewise, I used a secondary population consisting of

five employees of midlevel acquisition managers to participate in a focus group.

Data Saturation

Data saturation is the point in the research process when no new data, themes, or

concepts of value in the study emerge (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2020; Marshall

& Rossman, 2016). To achieve data saturation, the sample size in the study must be

sufficient. The sample size is sufficient if the researcher achieves data saturation, as data

saturation informs sample size sufficiency (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Marshall & Rossman,

2016). I used methodological triangulation to support data saturation in my study.

Methodological triangulation occurs when the multiple data collection methods produce a

point where the data findings converge, creating a triangulation where the sources yield

the same or remarkably similar findings, making the research more credible through convergence and data saturation (Abdalla et al., 2018).

Using multiple data collection methods, I collected data to investigate my research question and achieved data saturation. I used: (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews, (b) focus groups, (c) company document analysis, and (d) reflective journaling to attain methodological triangulation. After conducting semistructured interviews with eligible participants and interpreting the data, I used follow-up member checking interviews to allow participants to validate the meaning, voice, and accuracy of my interpretation. Using member checking, the researcher provides a summarization of their interpretation of the data to the participant to confirm the accuracy of the interpretation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2020; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Utilizing a focus group to investigate the same phenomenon, I gathered data from multiple perspectives in one setting. I analyzed relevant organizational documents to assess initiatives, policies, procedures, and metrics related to successful retention strategies. When this data converged, and no new information, coding, or themes emerged, I reached data saturation in my study.

Population Criteria

The specific population described in my research question defined my population inclusion criteria. As such, the primary qualified participant population for my single case study was midlevel federal acquisition managers from one federal acquisition organization in the southeastern United States who employed strategies that retained

seasoned acquisition employees. This population worked within the context of the bound case and possessed sufficient knowledge and experience to provide in-depth knowledge of the study issue. Additionally, I used a secondary population from the same organization for my focus group. The secondary population consisted of seasoned acquisition employees of midlevel federal acquisition managers whose intent to remain with the organization might be influenced by the managers' retention strategies. This population also worked within the bound case in the context of the area of study.

Interview Setting

Participant interviews occurred virtually through Google Meets outside the organization in a safe location, allowing participants to be comfortable and relaxed. Participants selected their location for the virtual interview. I interviewed participants from a location without distractions, as no one else was in my office. With the participants' permission, I recorded each session, taking notes as needed. Semistructured interview participants had a choice of virtual follow-up member checking or email follow-up member checking. I accomplished all follow-up member checking through email, which facilitated the participants' comfortable review of my interpretation of their responses. As the organization was in a telework status in response to COVID-19 protocol, I used virtual meetings and emails, and all interviews occurred outside of the agency's core work hours, negating the need for coordination with the organization's Director of Contracting and Human Resource Department to reserve a room away from heavy traffic areas to hold my focus group interview.

Ethical Research

Informed consent is a critical attribute of ethical research. Informed consent, required by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) Belmont Report, protects the welfare and rights of participants in research studies and mandates that participants receive and sign an informed consent document (Aldridge, 2022; Miller & Kimmelman, 2020). Informed consent guiding principles require that participants receive sufficient information to make a well informed, educated, autonomous decision on whether to participate in a study (Anabo et al., 2019; Miller & Kimmelman, 2020; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). These driving principles are stipulated in the three major tenants of (a) respect for person (autonomy), (b) beneficence (do no harm), and (c) justice (fairness and equality) in *The Belmont Report*. A foundational tenant for ethical research is the researcher's respect for person (potential participants). Respect for person is the researcher's respect and acknowledgment of participants' autonomy to make a well-informed decision participation decision. Thus, the researcher must provide the potential participant with sufficient information regarding (a) the purpose of the research and research procedures; (b) the risk and anticipated benefits of participation; (c) if therapy is involved, alternative procedures; (d) opportunities for the participant to ask questions; (e) voluntary nature of participation; and (f) participants right to withdraw for the study at any time without reprisal.

Moreover, the researcher must communicate the information so that a reasonable person can independently comprehend to make an independent decision to participate or not participate in the study (Anabo et al., 2019; Miller & Kimmelman, 2020; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Additionally, adhering to beneficence and justice, ethical research requires that researchers mitigate harm to participants while maximizing the benefits of the study and ensuring that there is a fair distribution of benefits and burdens when including and excluding participants. Accordingly, adhering to these guiding principles of *The Belmont Report*, I informed and explained (a) the nature of the study, (b) the purpose of the study, (c) study procedures, (d) the voluntary nature of participation, (e) potential benefits of the study, (f) risk, (g) the ability to withdraw from the study at any time without any reprisal, and (h) the right to confidentiality. Additionally, I provided participants with an informed consent form and answered participants' questions. I emailed the informed consent forms of this proposal to participants. Participants read and acknowledged informed consent by reading and emailing "I Consent."

As the researcher, I emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time. I further advised participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time by emailing me at the provided email stating that they wanted to withdraw. Participants received my contact information verbally and in writing during the initial invite and with their inquiry responses. No participants withdrew from the study. Thus, I did not have to send any participant a withdrawal confirmation email, shred their documents, or delete their information stored

on a thumb drive. I also addressed safeguarding participants' information during the informed consent discussion. Additionally, I clarified with participants that there were no financial incentives for participating in this study.

I protected the confidentiality of participants and their organization by assigning codes to them during the study, and when writing the study, I changed the codes to pseudonyms. In my study, I did not reference the organization by name or any other identifying information. I stored data collected from participants on an encrypted thumb drive stored in a locked safe and will keep it for 5 years. Furthermore, I conducted this study under the Walden University IRB approval number 03-15-22-0996380.

Data Collection Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary data collection instrument, generating and interpreting data (Fusch et al., 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Marshall and Rossman (2016) espoused that the researcher is the research instrument (p. 122). Therefore, as the researcher for my study, I served as the primary data collection instrument. As the primary data collection instrument, the researcher's preparation and interview skills contribute to the depth and quality of the data generated and the field notes (Clark & Vealé, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In the process of interpreting the data, the qualitative researcher (a) interrogates the data, (b) provides informed commentary, (c) codes the data, and (d) conducts a thematic analysis addressing the convergence and divergence of themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Clark & Vealé, 2018). Hence, as the primary data collection instrument, researchers should have a heightened awareness of their contribution to creating knowledge in the research process,

as the researcher's effectiveness as an instrument determines the depth and complexity of data interpretation. As such, qualitative researchers must be skilled in interviewing; thus, developing their ability to (a) ask open-ended questions, (b) ask probing and follow-up questions when needed, and (c) be silent when silence might generate an additional response from participants to operate as a research instrument capable of generating and interpreting in-depth and rich data.

The data collection instruments that I used include: (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews, (b) focus groups, (c) company document analysis, and (d) reflective journaling. Moreover, qualitative researchers employing more than one data collection method generate more than one evidence source, facilitating triangulation (Fusch et al., 2018).

Semistructured interviews consist of open-ended structured, scripted questions that the researcher paraphrases as needed to ensure the participant understands the question (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). Qualitative researchers use semistructured interviews to generate rich data for collection and analysis to yield an answer to the research question and are the most prevalent method of collecting data in qualitative research. Moreover, semistructured interviews are flexible enough to allow the researcher to ask probing questions to explore an issue in greater depth (Cypress, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Rowley, 2012). Hence, semistructured interviews were appropriate as qualitative researchers seeking to gain insight or better understand experiences, opinions, behaviors, or attitudes use semistructured interviews to collect data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Rowley, 2012). Rowley (2012) noted that

semistructured interviews should contain well-phrased questions that align with the research question. Rowley recommended that the number of interviewees ranges from six to eight with one-hour interviews. The participants that I interviewed consisted of six midlevel acquisition managers who have successfully implemented strategies to retain seasoned employees. I conducted 60-minute interviews. My semistructured interviews consisted of six open-ended questions that afforded the flexibility of asking probing questions when needed. I used a scripted interview protocol to guide my semistructured interview process (See Appendix A). Qualitative researchers can combine or supplement semistructured interviews with other qualitative data collection methods to enhance the rigor of the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Rowley, 2012). Member checking, a process that allows participants to review the researcher's interpretation of generated data to validate the authenticity of the participant's voice in the data as interpreted and annotated by the researcher, can enhance the quality of qualitative research (Fusch et al., 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

A focus group provides data from the perspectives of several participants generating a breadth of information to gain a better understanding of a phenomenon. Dilshad and Latif (2013) and Yin (2018) defined focus group interviews as a qualitative data collection technique in which participants with a common interest participate in a group interview led by a moderator and engage in a focused interview discussion. Dilshad and Latif noted that focus group interviews aid the researcher in gaining insight from the shared understanding of issues within a specific context from several perspectives. Focus group interviews facilitate the investigations of the quality of

relationships, situations, and activities and generate rich and in-depth data. Marshall and Rossman (2016) posited that focus group interviews increase the breadth of data collection.

I used a focus group to obtain data from a secondary population. Participants for the focus groups comprised five acquisition employees managed by midlevel federal acquisition managers. To guide my focus group process, I used the scripted focus group protocol in Appendix B of this proposal to interview focus group participants and moderate the discussion. The scripted focus group protocol guide contained six semistructured questions that I used to stimulate participants' discussions and generate rich, in-depth descriptions. Moreover, focus group interviews aid qualitative researchers in understanding the issue from the participants' perspectives and the significance assigned to the relationship, activity, or situation based on the interpretation of the experience by the focus group participant (Dilshad & Latif, 2013).

Document analysis as a data collection instrument is the systematic process of reviewing and evaluating documents to collect data that the researcher analyzes and interprets to generate meaning to understand an issue better and develop practical knowledge (Marshall et al., 2021; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Documents analyzed should share some commonality with the bounded case of study (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that documents inform the researcher of the context, facilitate validity check and triangulation, and facilitate easy implementation in other settings. Moreover, when used with other qualitative research data collection methods, document analysis reduces bias, enhances the researcher's understanding of the

study issue, and contributes to data convergence (Alam, 2021). Thus, the use of

document analysis was appropriate for my case study. I applied document analysis to the

content of the following public organizational documents and policies: (a) COVID-19

Workplace Safety Plan, (b) Recruitment, Relocation, and Retention Order, (c) Workplace

Strategy Initiatives, (d) Why Work Here, (e) Work-life Balance and Wellness, and (f)

Best Place to Work in the Federal Government. These documents reflected organizational

initiatives, guidance, and policies congruent with data collected from interviews and

aided me in triangulating and converging data to answer the research question.

Given that the researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative

research, the researcher must strive to mitigate bias in the research process, particularly in

the annotation of interview notes (Clark & Vealé, 2018; Fusch et al., 2017). Reflexivity,

accomplished through reflective journaling, can help mitigate the researcher's bias

(Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Reflexivity is the researchers' self-awareness of personal

values, background, and experience that might influence the researcher's perception and

subjectivity during the research process. As such, qualitative researchers use reflective

journaling to reflect upon notes and thoughts to mitigate researcher's bias and enhance the

credibility and trustworthiness of their research (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). Since the

researcher is the primary data collection instrument, reflexivity is beneficial throughout

the data collection and interpretation process.

Using reflexivity, researchers can capture and acknowledge personal impressions

and feelings that can contribute to bias in interpreting the data. Additionally, researchers

should build strategies in their research, such as member-checking and reflective

journaling, to mitigate bias. Thus, I used reflective journaling, and member checking

follow up after semistructured interviews to mitigate bias in my research and enhance the

reliability and validity of my research.

Data Collection Technique

To explore strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain

seasoned acquisition employees, I used: (a) semistructured interviews with member

checking follow up interviews, (b) focus groups, (c) company document analysis, and (d)

reflective journaling data collection techniques. In qualitative research, researchers

consider interviews the most used and most significant data collection techniques as

interviews allow researchers to engage in focused inquiry about the phenomenon from

participants experiencing the phenomenon within the bounded case study (Barrett &

Twycross, 2018; Marshall et al., 2021; Yin, 2018). Accordingly, interviews expose the

human experience from various participants' personal perspectives affording the

researcher in-depth data to gain a better understanding of the issue (Barrett & Twycross,

2018; Cypress, 2018; Hammarberg et al., 2016; Tomaszewski et al., 2020; Xerri, 2018;

Yin, 2018). Thus, I used a semistructured interview technique to generate and gather data

from my primary participant pool of midlevel federal acquisition managers to better

understand the successful retention strategies used by those managers. Xerri (2018) noted

that, though controlled, semistructured interviews allow participants to add their

personalities and perspective to the discussion. Hence, semistructured interviews enabled

me to follow a line of inquiry from my interview protocol, asking each participant in the

one-on-one interviews the same questions. Additionally, the interview protocol afforded

me a personalized participant response, the flexibility to ask follow-up probing questions for clarity and richer in-depth data, and it ensured that I covered the same interview elements with each participant to mitigate bias.

A focus group is also a frequently used qualitative data collection technique in which the researcher serves as a facilitator of the group's discussion in response to semistructured questions posed to participants (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). A focus group technique provides qualitative researchers a platform to gather multiple perspectives generating a large amount of data related to the bounded case study in one setting and facilitating the cross-checking of data across data collection techniques (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Marshall et al., 2021; Xerri, 2018). Furthermore, focus group participants share a common characteristic related to the research question. The commonality element in my five-participant focus group is that of being employees supervised by midlevel federal acquisition managers who have used successful strategies to retain seasoned contract specialists. Individual semistructured interviews with midlevel federal acquisition managers served as my primary data collection technique to answer my research question. They aided me in gathering in-depth data to better understand successful retention strategies in the real-life context of that specific population (midlevel federal acquisitions managers). Hence, focus group participants were the secondary participant population that provided data that corroborated data gathered using my primary data collection method.

Before conducting the semistructured interviews of my focus groups, I contacted the study participants using emails and virtual platforms an established rapport and trust.

I contacted participants to schedule a date and time for the interview convenient for them and made the participants feel safe. Using the interview protocol in Appendix A, I continued to build trust, shared contact information, and initiated the interview. I conducted 60-minute interviews. Following the interview protocol, I covered critical information to include components of informed consent, emphasizing the voluntary nature of participating in the study and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I also shared contact information for such tasks as follow-up member checking or withdrawing from the study. Initiating the question phase of the interview, I asked scripted open-ended questions that yielded rich, in-depth data in sequential order; asking probing questions, I explored the participant's response in greater depth when warranted. I also included my closing statements in the interview script. With the permission of the participants, I recorded the participants' interviews. Recording the interviews facilitated my ability to annotate notes regarding visual cues such as voice tone and body language and transcribing the interview verbatim. Marshall and Rossman (2016) posited that member checking enhances the credibility of qualitative research and ensures authenticity to the voice of participants. Hence, I used member checking to follow up with the participants who reviewed my interpretation and summaries of their responses to add rigor and credibility to my research and ensure that the study reflected the participants' authentic perspectives.

A focus group technique was one of my secondary data collection techniques. A focus group data collection method is appropriate for a secondary population as the focus group interview can enhance the breadth of research data (Hammarberg et al., 2016;

Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Using a focus group composed of five participants, I

employed a focus group protocol (Appendix B) to moderate a 90-minute focus group

discussion. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that a focus group should consist of 4 to

12 participants that share characteristics relevant to the research question. Other focus

group methodologists posited a group size of 6 to 12 participants (Barrett & Twycross,

2018). The focus group should not be so small that the researcher cannot collect in-depth

data, nor should the focus group be so large that participants do not have sufficient time

to share rich information. I posed six questions to the group, inserting probing questions

when appropriate to collect more in-depth information. I closed out the focus group using

a script. The focus group enabled me to gather a wider variety of information in a shorter

period. However, the disadvantage of a focus group is the potential for a participant to

dominate the group, the potential for limited disclosure due to the lack of confidentiality,

as well as the potential for group conformance (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Cypress,

2018; Marshall et al., 2021). Moreover, researchers have noted that the downside of using

semistructured individual interviews and focus group interviews is the time required to

transcribe and analyze the large quantity of data (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Marshall et

al., 2021).

Document analysis, both physical and digital, related to the case study,

particularly decision-making documents, is beneficial in the researchers gaining an in-

depth understanding of the phenomenon of study (Cypress, 2018; Marshall et al., 2021;

Tomaszewski et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) noted that document analysis data

collection could corroborate case study evidence. Using document analysis, I analyzed

relevant company documents. I obtained agency documents that were publicly available and did not require a Freedom of Information Act request. I noted the type of document and the purpose of the document, and how it is relevant to strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees.

Reflexivity is the researcher's self-awareness of personal values, background, and experience that might influence the researcher's perception and subjectivity during the research process, contributing to the researcher's bias (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). As such, qualitative researchers use reflective journaling to reflect upon notes and thoughts to mitigate researcher's bias and enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of their research. Using reflective journaling, I reflected upon decisions, including annotations and my attitude and beliefs, after employing each data collection technique and journaling those notes aided in my endeavor to mitigate bias in my study.

Data Organization Technique

The deep rich data generated from open ended questions, a unique attribute of qualitative data collection methods such as semistructured interviews and focus group interviews, result in large volumes of data that the researcher must manage (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As such, organizing data is a pivotal aspect of the qualitative case study analytic process and establishing the trustworthiness of case study data. In my study, with an excel spreadsheet as my data log and tracking instrument, I organized a database that I tracked for accuracy. I cross-referenced data across my data collection methods of: (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews, (b) focus groups, (c) company document analysis, and (d) reflective journaling. I used a spreadsheet to log

all raw data by date, time, location, data collection method, participants, group pseudonyms and numbers, and document type.

Furthermore, I categorized data derived from all data collection methods according to concepts and ideas, as categorizing the data from all collection methods according to the similarity in concepts and ideas initiated methodological triangulation. Using coding, identifying topics, issues, similarities, and differences (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019), facilitated refining of data categorization to enhance data organization and mitigated the confusion of themes during the data analysis process.

I labeled and uploaded interview recordings, transcriptions, copies of company documents, and reflective journaling data files to a secure thumb drive, backed up, encrypted, and stored in a fireproof safe and will retain the information in the safe for 5 years after completing my study. I will keep physical documents in the same fireproof safe for the same 5-year period, and I will be the only person with access to the safe. At the end of the 5-year required raw data retention period, I will shred and destroy all raw data. During the data collection and analysis process, I periodically reviewed the spreadsheet and the database for accuracy and completeness, noting any changes as this process facilitated transparency in my research and provided an audit trail.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the research phase where the researcher makes sense of the raw data collected through data analysis and interpretation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As posited by Marshall and Rossman (2016), in qualitative data analysis, the researcher

becomes familiar with the raw data, examines the data, identifies and annotates general statements about underlying themes. I employed methodological triangulation in the data analysis process in my qualitative single case study. Qualitative case study researchers use triangulation as triangulation may elicit different data or different perspectives, enhancing the depth and credibility of the study (Cypress, 2018; Morse, 2015) as well as aid in data convergence and reaching data saturation (Abdalla et al., 2018; Fusch et al., 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Thus, I analyzed data collected from: (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews; (b) focus groups; (c) company document analysis; and (d) reflective journaling to categorize, code, and identify themes across the different data collection methods.

Marshall and Rossman (2016) cited seven phases of the data analysis process: (a) organizing the data, (b) immersion in the data, (c) generating case summaries and possible categories and themes, (d) coding the data, (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos, (f) searching for alternative understandings, and (g) writing the report or other format for presenting the study. In general, qualitative researchers posited that analyzing the data entails managing and organizing the data, reading and rereading the data annotating emerging concepts, coding and sorting the data, and conducting thematic analysis to identify emerging themes and relationships across the data collected from the different data collections methods (Alam, 2021; Clark & Vealé, 2018). Subsequently, researchers use the knowledge gained to develop and assess interpretations and contextual meaning that they will synthesize to describe the essence of the data (Cypress, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Thus, after organizing the

raw data gathered from participants' interviews, documents, and my reflective journal in analyzing my data, I maintained a log, notating the types of data, the date and time I collected the data, and pseudonyms assigned to the participant providing data. Accordingly, the first category of separation was by data type. Next, I transcribed data gathered from the semistructured interviews and the focus group, including notes such as body language, voice reflection, and pauses annotated from the interviews. Qualitative researchers note that the next step requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the data to become highly familiar with the data (Alam, 2021; Cypress, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Thus, immersing myself in the data, I read and reread the data, particularly interview transcripts and annotated notes in the margins. Furthermore, I identified emerging concepts and codes and coded data to categorize likely themes according to prevalent retention concepts and SET constructs identified from the literature review and related research foundational to my study's conceptual framework. Therefore, my initial coding labels included: (a) employee engagement, (b) employee development, (c) incentive awards, (d) family work-life balance, (e) empowering employees, (f) trust (trusting leaders), (g) leader respecting employees, (h) employee respect for leader/perceived leadership competency), (i) organizational culture, and (j) job satisfaction.

Using qualitative data analysis software can enhance the data analysis process (data organization, reduction, management, coding, sorting, and concept linking across data sources) (Alam, 2021). To enhance my data analysis and understanding of the study issue, I used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to facilitate coding, categorization,

the development of themes, and the generation of themes and subthemes tables. Using NVivo requires creating and registering the project as this maintains the study's files and uploaded data such as interviews, coding, annotated notes, and documents with brief descriptions (Alam, 2021). I ran coding reports generated in NVivo from coded transcripts and assessed potential relationships, overlapping categories, and themes from the different data collection methods. I reviewed journaled notes related to my thoughts, created memos and annotations using NVivo, and linked memos and annotations to interview and focus group transcript data. I linked sentiments that I captured in NVivo to coding. For my organizational documents, I reviewed the documents and used relevant data to corroborate interview and focus group data findings. I also used my analysis process for data triangulation, saturation, and interpretation and to conceptualize the findings bringing meaning to the data from the multiple data collection methods in the study to write up my findings and present my study findings.

Reliability and Validity

Whether quantitative or qualitative, research must meet its methodological standards of quality and usability. Reliability and validity in research are fundamental concepts for determining research quality and usability (Cypress, 2017; Liao & Hitchcock, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The research methodology (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method) drives the assessment approach used to determine the research's quality and useability (Cypress, 2017, 2018; Hammarberg et al., 2016; Liao & Hitchcock, 2018). Bleiker et al. (2019) wrote that quantitative research methodologies generate scales and measures and establish generalizability and statistical significance to

support the reliability and validity of the research. Hence, researchers assess the reliability of quantitative research based on whether a similar study under similar conditions (data collection methods and analytical procedures) conducted at a different time could be replicated and yield consistent findings. Additionally, in quantitative research, validity is assessed based on the accuracy of measures and whether instruments measure what the researcher intended to measure (Morse, 2015; Rashid et al., 2019). Thus, validity, reliability, generalizability, and objectivity are the criteria for determining quantitative research quality.

Based on the approach to qualitative research, the standards for determining the research's quality differ from the criteria for quantitative research. The naturalistic inquiry and interpretive nature of qualitative research necessitate that the criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research be determined using different standards than those used for determining the quality of quantitative research (Cypress, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Rashid et al., 2019). Qualitative research findings are based on the researcher's systematic data collection methods and interpretation of verbal, textual, and visual data (Cypress, 2017, 2018; Hammarberg et al., 2016; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Accordingly, the data collection techniques and instruments and the analytical techniques contribute to qualitative research's reliability and validity (Cypress, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers assess these elements under the comparable standards of dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability that determine the standard for rigor, trustworthiness, and quality in qualitative research (Cypress, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using different but comparable standards, qualitative researchers produce

reliable and valid research following the guiding principles for establishing the quality

and usability in qualitative research.

Reliability

The criteria of reliability as a standard in assessing the quality of research is

characteristic of quantitative research. In contrast, dependability, a characteristic that is

critical to the research's trustworthiness and consistency, is the comparable standard for

assessing reliability in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Morse, 2015).

Cypress (2017, 2018) and Hammarberg et al. (2016) posited that dependability in

qualitative research addresses consistency in interpretation such that other researchers

looking at the same data would draw similar patterns, codes, and themes. Moreover,

Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that achieving dependability necessitates that any

changing conditions that result in changes that the researcher must make as a result of

gaining a better understanding of the setting must be accounted for and transparent. Thus,

the research should include changes that transpire while exploring the research problem

within the context of its occurrence, the authenticity of the participants' voices, and

plausible findings (Cypress, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Marshall et al., 2021).

Accordingly, qualitative researchers can attain dependability by researching in a logical,

traceable, documented, and transparent process that facilitates the reader's ability to

assess the dependability of the research (Morse, 2015).

I used member checking, a rich description of methodological processes, reflexive

journaling, and methodological triangulation to enhance the dependability of my study.

Tomaszewski et al. (2020) cited member checking and reflexive journaling as strategies

to establish trustworthiness in qualitative research as it enriches data collection and enhances the accuracy of data interpretation. Furthermore, researchers use member checking to share their interpretive summaries of data from participant interviews with the participant enabling the participant to verify the accuracy of the summary and provide clarity if needed (Fusch et al., 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Accordingly, to enhance the study's reliability, I used member checking follow-up interviews to validate the accuracy and authenticity of participants' meaning in my interpretation of their interviews.

My use of reflexivity facilitated my mitigation of bias in the research. Reflexivity allows researchers to capture and acknowledge personal impressions and feelings that could contribute to bias in interpreting the data (Rettke et al., 2018). Thus, researchers use reflexive journaling to enhance their self-awareness of personal values, background, and experiences that might influence their perception and subjectivity during the research process (Rettke et al., 2018). I used reflective journaling to reflect upon notes and thoughts to mitigate the researcher's bias and enhance the dependability of my research. Additionally, my reflexive journal contained logistics, memos, annotations, and a self-critical account of my reflections to mitigate researcher bias. There were no methodological or theoretical changes during the study requiring documentation and a rationale for the changes.

I also used an: (a) interview protocol, (b) focus group protocol, and (c) methodological triangulation, which supported data collection from six semistructured interviews with member checking follow up, focus group data from five focus group

participants, an analysis of public organizational documents, and reflective journaling to enhance dependability in my study. The protocols in Appendix A and B served as a guide and kept me focused and consistent when conducting interviews. Methodological triangulation, using multiple methods to collect data, supports data convergence across the different methods of data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Moreover, my research design, methodological instruments and techniques, detailed description of processes, and reflective journaling supported a logical, traceable, documented, and transparent research process to facilitate a reader's ability to assess the research's dependability.

Validity

Validity, a key criterion in determining the usability of research, is assessed in qualitative research based on the credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Hence, trustworthiness in qualitative research is evaluated based on credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Cypress, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Cypress (2017) noted that the research design and methodological processes are foundational to qualitative research credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Member checking, triangulation, audit trails, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement with the data, and reflexivity are strategies that contribute to the comparable standard of validity in qualitative research (Cypress, 2017; Marshall et al., 2021). In my study, I used member checking, triangulation, and reflexivity to add credibility, transferability, and confirmability to my study.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the accuracy, truthfulness, believability, and value of the findings (Cypress, 2017). Hammarberg et al. (2016) noted that the credibility of research is the reader's confidence in the truth and interpretation of the data and the trustworthiness of the findings. Hence, readers who share the experience can recognize the experience through rich descriptions in the study that reflect participants' experiences in the bound context (Cypress, 2017; Hammarberg et al., 2016). To enhance the credibility of my study, I utilized prolonged engagement when collecting the data, transcribing the data, and analyzing the data. I used my interview and focus group script protocols (Appendix A and B) to ensure an introductory time with participants, guide the interview, and close out the interview. I took notes during the interviews, recorded the interviews, transcribed data using NVivo transcription, and listened to the recording several times to ensure accuracy in the transcripts. I read and reread the data, conducted several reviews, and categorized and sorted data thematically. Using follow-up member checking, participants reviewed my interpretive summary of the data collected from their interview to correct or confirm the accuracy and authenticity of their voiced experience in my summaries. I used reflective journaling to remain self-aware to mitigate the researcher's bias. I employed methodological triangulation, the process of collecting data using several data collection methods, to collect data using semistructured interviews with follow up member checking, focus group interviews, document analysis, and reflective journaling to answer the research question. As noted by Cypress (2018) and Marshall and Rossman (2016), methodological triangulation

enhances the credibility of qualitative research as the purpose of methodological triangulation is to have the data from the various collection methods reduce misinterpretation of data, reflect a point of data redundancy, a point where the data converges, corroborates data, and illuminates the research. Accordingly, my multiple data collection methods triangulated emerging themes, supported data interpretation, and yielded a point where no new information, codes, or themes emerged. Additionally, I used methodological triangulation to increase my research's credibility, as establishing dependability in my findings can contribute to the research's credibility, as my research must be dependable to be credible.

Transferability

Qualitative researchers posit that transferability in qualitative research is the ability to transfer findings to a similar setting or another context, proving to be helpful to others while preserving the meaning and inference from the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Moreover, the qualitative researcher's role in establishing transferability in research is to ensure that thick data is collected and analyzed to describe the context, as it is the responsibility of the researcher seeking to transfer the finding to another context or similar situation to judge transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Accordingly, I used rich descriptions of logical, traceable, documented, and transparent methodological processes, including the interview protocol and the focus group protocol, to enhance the transferability of the findings

Confirmability

Confirmability requires the researcher to establish neutral and accurate interpretations and findings derived exclusively from the data (Cypress, 2017; Morse, 2015). Since the researcher is the primary data collection instrument and interpreter, the researcher must employ strategies to mitigate the researcher's bias to enhance objectivity. Accordingly, I used reflective journaling to document self-reflection and mitigate researcher's bias. I employed an audit trail to document and review my data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Additionally, I used follow-up member checking interviews, methodological triangulation, and probing questions to achieve confirmability in my study.

Data Saturation

As many methods used to achieve validity in qualitative research overlap, I used semistructured interviews with follow-up member checking and methodological triangulation to achieve data saturation. Methodological triangulation and its attributes of producing data redundancy and the point where the data converges is a strategy for achieving data saturation. Accordingly, when interviews, member checking, the focus group, and organizational documents yielded no new data or new themes, I achieved data saturation, enhancing my study's credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I presented the research plan to investigate successful strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees. Topics addressed included the researcher's role as the primary data collection instrument,

mitigating the researcher's bias, selecting study participants, and the research method and design to guide the data collection and analysis process. Section 2 concluded with a discussion on the veracity of the findings.

Section 3 includes the presentation of the research findings. In presenting the research findings, I discuss the application of the findings to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations, and areas for future research. The conclusion of Section 3 consists of a discussion on reflections and the concluding comments.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to discover strategies midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees. I used a primary participant pool of midlevel federal acquisition managers and a secondary participant pool of employees supervised by midlevel federal acquisition managers from a federal acquisition organization in the United States to explore my research question. Secondary participant pool members were not necessarily under the supervision of midlevel acquisition managers in the primary participant pool. Using a multiple data collection approach, I collected data from six managers using semistructured interviews with member checking and collected data from five employees supervised by managers using a single focus group. I also reviewed public organizational documents to assess policy and practices related to retention strategies and reflective journaling to mitigate researcher bias.

Using NVivo data analysis and transcription software, I transcribed, coded, and analyzed data to assist in identifying emerging themes. Five similar primary themes for successful retention strategies emerged from data collected from midlevel federal acquisition managers and focus group participants. The primary themes identified were: (a) organizational culture/environment, (b) employee engagement, (c) job satisfaction, (d) work-life balance, and (e) leadership/managers. However, the themes differed in the hierarchy of importance and frequency percentages.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question was: What strategies do midlevel federal acquisition managers use to retain seasoned acquisition employees? My conceptual framework, the lens to interpret my case study findings, was the SET. SET theorizes that the value of an exchange drives the reciprocity of the exchange of the other party (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). In the context of an organization, employees perceived value of exchanges at the organization level and the job level (manager/supervisor level) influence employees' intent to stay in organizations, increasing employee retention rates.

Using semistructured interviews, I collected rich, in-depth employee retention strategies data from six midlevel federal acquisition managers (MP1, MP2, MP3, MP4, MP5, MP6) based on their personal experiences and perspectives. The five focus group participants' (FP1, FP2, FP3, FP4, FP5) personal experiences and perspectives afforded me unique insight from the reciprocating parties of organizational exchanges, adding valuable insight into the SET premise of reciprocating exchanges based on the perceived value of an exchange. Applying journaling memos and annotations, I captured sentiments from semistructured interviews and focus group participants that afforded me insight, and I linked sentiments to themes and participant groups. My analysis of public organizational documents yielded policies and practices associated with retention strategies. An analysis of data from these sources yielded the five primary emerging themes listed in Table 1.

Analyzed data yielded similar themes for midlevel federal acquisition managers and employees of midlevel acquisition managers. Although some themes were similar, the percentage of references differed, resulting in a different ranking of emerging themes. The different ranking of themes suggests a difference in the significance of the underlying attributes within the framework's constructs of successful retention strategies for the managerial and employee participant groups.

Table 1

Five Major Themes and Frequency

Themes	Number of references	Percentage of references
Managers		
Environment, culture	529	53%
Employee engagement	132	13%
Job satisfaction\advancement, promotion, goals	132	13%
Work-life balance, flexible work schedule	115	11%
Leadership, manager	93	9%
Total	1001	100%
Focus group		
Environment, culture	114	50%
Leadership, manager	46	20%
Work-life balance, flexible work schedule	27	12%
Employee engagement	23	10%
Job satisfaction/advancement/promotions/goals	20	9%
Total	230	100%

Theme 1: Environment/Culture

The theme environment or culture of the organization was the most frequent construct identified in managerial interview data and employee focus group data. An organization's environment, synonymously called organizational culture, was frequently referred to by midlevel managerial participants and employee focus group participants at

the job level (branch level) rather than the organization's division or regional level. Midlevel managers referenced a positive organizational environment/culture as a safe place or safe environment as their most effective retention strategy. Managerial participants characterized a safe environment as a safe place to ask questions, raise concerns, make unintentional mistakes, and still feel valued as an employee. MP3 referred to a positive environment/culture as "a good work environment," stating, "creating a good work environment where people want to come to work as a retention strategy." MP6 conveyed a similar sentiment that aligned with MP3's sentiment, noting, "You know, we can either create a safe environment or an unsafe [environment], and I think people leave if they don't feel comfortable." MP6 also expressed a commitment to creating a safe environment for employees, noting the inclusion of "a safe environment where employees feel safe" in the branch's mission statement.

Consistent with midlevel managerial participants, employee focus group participants' most frequently referenced strategy for retaining seasoned employees was a positive environment/culture, also referenced as atmosphere by focus group participants. FP5 revealed,

> At a previous organization, I saw a few people leaving … I heard the third or fourth person was going to [this agency], I said, ... what's going on here? That's when I started learning about the culture [of the organization], more than just what they did. That was an eye-opener. Again, It's the culture of the environment that is attractive to people and helps retain people, and that's what brought me here [to the organization], for the most part.

Based on my analysis of data collected from midlevel managerial participants, employee focus group participants, and organizational documents such as the Employee Viewpoint Survey (EVPS), managers and employees assess an organization's environment/culture in the framework of the attributes of respect, communication, support, and trust. Both participant groups characterized a positive work environment in the context of emerging subthemes of respect, communication, support, and trust.

Subthemes

Just as midlevel managerial and focus group participants most frequently referenced a positive environment as a retention strategy, my findings yielded similar alignment in environment/culture subthemes, including similarity in the hierarchy of subthemes. The alignment in subthemes implies a degree of congruency between midlevel managerial retention strategies and employees' desire for and perception of what constitutes a positive work environment/culture. However, as reflected in Table 2, the subthemes differed in the percentage of references. It is plausible that the perceived drivers of significance and characteristics of the attributes assigned to the subthemes of respect, communication, support, and trust within the context of a positive work environment/culture by the participant groups contribute to the different frequency percentages.

Table 2

Environment Subthemes and Frequency

Themes	Number of references	Percentage of references
Managers		
Environment, culture\respect	170	32%
Environment, culture\communication	110	21%
Environment, culture\support	100	19%
Environment, culture\trust, honesty, authenticity	79	15%
Environment, culture\general	70	13%
Total	529	100%
Focus group		
Environment, culture\respect	30	26%
Environment, culture\communication	25	22%
Environment, culture\support	22	19%
Environment, culture\trust, honesty, authenticity	21	18%
Environment, culture\general	16	14%
Total	114	100%

Respect. Respect was the most frequently referenced subtheme of a positive environment/culture by managerial and focus group participants. An assessment of data collected from both participant groups revealed congruency in the characteristics assigned to respect. Characteristics assigned to managers' concept of a respectful environment/culture framework included: (a) valuing employees (acknowledging employees and their differences; validating employees' knowledge, strengths, and contributions to positive performance outcomes; allowing the humanity of employees to thrive; and authentically caring about employees); (b) being respectful to employees; and (c) respecting their employees.

Valuing and caring for employees were the most significant characteristics in the respect framework for managers and focus group participants. Managers displayed the most heartfelt sentiment when discussing valuing employees, as caring for employees was foundational to their discussions. Managers' data yielded that a culture where employees are valued was the top attribute of the positive environment/culture managers strived to achieve. Managers described valuing employees as appreciating, showing compassion, caring for employees, and engaging in practices that show employees that their work-related goals, personal goals, and well-being are valued. Valuing the humanity of employees was an unexpected minor theme that managers noted. Managers described valuing employees' humanity as valuing employees as human beings and not just workers. Toward this end, managers championed allowing employees to see managers' vulnerable and imperfect human side to convey to employees that their work environment was a safe place to be an employee's authentic self. One of the most poignant managerial comments reflecting this sentiment was MP6's statement, "an environment where it is safe to get to know each other, be humans and not just workers."

Focus group participants' attributes of valuing employees included: (a) appreciating, acknowledging, and validating employees' knowledge, strengths, and contributions to positive performance outcomes; (b) genuinely caring about employees; and (c) overall respect for employees. Focus group participants deemed: (a) genuinely caring about employees and (c) overall respect for employees as critical elements of a positive job-level work environment/culture.

Moreover, from the analyzed data, my findings highlight the significance and hierarchical role of managers striving to respect employees and employees' desire to be respected. The frequency and context of references to respect attributes align with managers' assertions. For example, MP6 tied respect to an environment of respectful accountability, noting, "We all make mistakes. There's a way to hold people accountable but still treat them with respect and try to help them." With a similar sentiment, MP4 addressed respectful accountability from a dual perspective, stating, "I want to be able to respect what they're saying and what they're feeling and how I'm making them feel."

Focus group participants' data revealed similar attributes, with caring being the primary aspect of respect, followed by valuing employees. Focus group participants added the caveat of managers rendering respect/caring for employees through traits such as genuineness and authenticness. For example. FP3 stated:

> [A positive environment/culture], it's a combination of things. It's genuineness, sincerity, empathy, compassion, and transparency about the day-to-day things… You combine those things and make a genuine attempt to show your team members that you're sincere about taking care of them and being concerned and asking about their families.

FP5 echoed a similar sentiment, noting:

> Your supervisor coming to you and asking, how are you personally? Is everything good? You know, it makes me think about Maya Angelo, who said something like, people don't remember what you said, but they remember how you made them feel. And you'll never forget that.

Likewise, FP3 commented:

> People don't care what you know until they know you care. And so knowing that
> your [job level midlevel managers] truly care beyond just the word and being on
> time… Do you actually genuinely care about what's going on in my life enough
> to know when I'm off when something's off with me?

Communication. Communication was the second most referenced attribute of a positive organizational environment/culture by midlevel federal acquisition managers. Similarly, managers' most frequently referenced minor themes were open and honest communication and honest dyadic communication characterized by job-level management listening to employees. MP1 championed open and honest communication, including dyadic communication, while MP2 championed open communication without fear using an open-door policy, noting, "having an open-door policy, not a gotcha environment, but an environment that cares about the employees. Personal care, like, you're not just a cog in a machine or a widget." MP5 expanded the attributes of open communication and listening to employees, incorporating "hearing and understanding employees to discover their goals and get to know them." Although MP4 did not directly reference a positive work environment, MP4 captured characteristics also attributed to a positive work environment by other managers, underpinning those attributes with open communication and the tagline "You've got to know what makes your people tick." MP4 discussed listening to employees, getting to know employees, genuinely caring about employees, valuing employees' knowledge and skill set, appreciating and recognizing employees, supporting employees to reach work and personal goals, providing

meaningful work, trust, and respect with paths leading back to open and honest communication. For example, in responding to strategies used to retain seasoned acquisition employees, MP4 used key phrases noting:

> A whole lot of back-and-forth communication …you've got to get to know your people. … Explore where the employee wants to be in five years. Ask how can I help you obtain those goals?… Midyear ask, How am I doing? … Help them stay focused on their goals, …challenge them …develop and grow them. …Recognize how people want to be recognized. ...Respect their knowledge, and use it. Recognize and appreciate their work…hear their concerns, get their input, and allow them to feel free to express their opinion and not be shunned. For example, I give them the opportunity to ask questions and answer them as transparently as possible.

Like managers, focus group participants' top reference for a positive culture/environment was open and honest dyadic communication. Focus group participants cited managers engaging in one-on-one conversations with employees about their personal and professional goals, concerns, family, or general non-work-related conversations on topics of importance to employees as essential to establishing and maintaining a positive culture. Communication attributes included sharing information regarding changes that will impact the employee and seeking input from employees regarding changes that impact their inputs and outputs were also deemed integral to the communication framework by focus group participants.

Congruent with managers, FP3 addressed having a safe environment for communication, noting "having a safe space to vocalize concerns without feeling like it [the concerns] was going to come back to haunt you, open and honest transparent communication. In parallel to FP3's statements, focus group participants linked some aspects of communication to the traits of valuing and caring for employees' attributes of respect. For employees, managers create value in their communication by doing what they said they would do, providing a basis for establishing trust, which focus group participants saw as characteristic of open and honest communication. As MP4 noted that caring about employees "starts and ends with open communication."

Supportive Environment/Culture. Perceived organizational support from managers/supervisors at the job level was the third most referenced attribute of a positive environment/culture. Support included but was not limited to supporting employee creativity, their input, their job-related and personal goals, and providing needed resources. An analysis of the data suggests that support and caring overlap, similar to communication and caring. For example, MP2 stated the following:

I think letting them know you're not just being nice to keep them; you want them to be better. I want you to explore whatever opportunities you have. My job is to make you better than I am or better than you were when you first got here. I think that means a lot, in terms of people wanting to stay or not, just because they're like, hey, this person actually cares about me and instead of, you know, this person is just using me to advance themselves. Do I want to go somewhere where

somebody is going to be advancing themselves? Or do I want to stay under somebody looking out for me until that right moment comes versus just leaving?"

Akin to midlevel managers, focus group participants suggested that managers support employees by creating an environment that grows and develops employees. FP4 noted:

Job-level supervisors/managers are accountable for creating an environment that brings out the best in people and motivates them to do better than they normally do, and grows them, so they're able to advance, and the supervisor happily supports that because they want their people to succeed. Where managers don't just want to grow employees internally and keep their little team together so that way, they [managers] are successful and they can make their upper-level supervisor happy.

Expounding on a safe environment, MP6 addressed the attribute of support in the framework of a safe environment by adding the following:

Creating a safe environment where people come to you and go, hey, this failed, we messed up, or it just failed. Sometimes so much is out of our control. Sometimes bad things are going to happen when we did everything right. So, I think it helps retain people, but it also helps those issues bubble up to the surface when people feel safe to bring them up. I think a lot of acquisition people want to get it right. They want to be right. I want to go somewhere where I feel safe to be human and just have somebody to support [me].

Interestingly, focus group members suggested similar characteristics identifying

supporting employees' creativity, input, goals, and access to resources. Focus group

participants discussed supporting their creativity in the context of autonomy in work,

Trust and Authenticity. A culture steeped in trust, honesty, fairness, and

authenticity was the fourth most referenced attribute of a positive culture by managers.

According to managers, trust and authenticity must be an underlying element of

communication, as MP4 and MP5 vehemently stated that communication must be

transparent and honest, emphasizing building trust by being truthful. Expounding on the

attributes of a good work environment, MP3 defined a good environment where people

want to come to work as an environment predicated on fairness, respect, and how you

treat people. In alignment with other managers' comments, MP2 asserted, "I think people

want to work for people they know and trust." Echoing the underpinnings of the SET,

MP4 noted:

> You have to be able to convey the trust and admiration that you have for your
>
> employees, and your employees reciprocating that for you... you can't get there
>
> without open dialogue… how do I want to be treated, value your people.

Mirroring managers, focus group members championed an environment that

permeates fair and equitable treatment, positing that they contribute to a positive job-

level environment. Participants in the focus group suggested that trust was foundational

to successful retention strategies. Focus group participants stated that there has to be trust

on the employees' part that managers will implement strategies and follow through on

elements such as getting to know what motivates employees and their goals. Focus group

participants shared that trusting managers will adhere to retention practices that support motivating and achieving their goals is critical to retaining seasoned employees.

Organizational Documents

COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan. I analyzed the organization's COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan, a public document. The document's content noted that the organization developed the plan based on its guiding principles to prioritize health and safety decisions. The document contained the agency's commitment to telework and flexible work environments to attract and retain top talent as one of its guiding principles. The principle read as follows:

"[Name of agency] strives to be a leader in telework and flexible work environments, to fulfill our mission, attract and retain top talent, improve the customer experience, and align operations with employee preferences when possible." This principle is congruent with the construct of work-life balance.

The guiding principle also states that the organization "incorporates the agency's diversity, inclusion, and accessibility goals in the workplace to better support their workforce and customers." This guiding principle corroborates managers' strategies, the study's findings of a supportive work environment as a retention strategy, and the construct of perceived organizational support in retention literature.

Organizational Order Recruitment, Relocation, and Retention Incentives. An organizational Order governing the use of retention incentives entitled Recruitment, Relocation, and Retention Incentives read as follows: "Retention Incentives-Authorized for current Agency employees if the agency has determined that the employee is likely to

leave for a position outside of federal service." In alignment with the purpose of the incentive, recipients of retention incentives are obligated to sign a service agreement to complete a specified period of service for the receipt of the incentive.

Although midlevel federal acquisition managers and focus group participants addressed monetary rewards as a retention strategy, neither participant group directly addressed retention incentives. The purpose of the retention incentive policy document is congruent with retention strategies. The concept of a retention incentive to enhance retention aligns with the reward construct in the SET, the construct of rewards in peer-reviewed literature, and the subtheme of valuing employees via rewards identified in the emerging themes. Shanock et al. (2019) and Sungu et al. (2019) cited the construct of reward as an attribute that contributes to employees' perception of organizational support. Therefore, the organization's retention incentive affords managers an additional resource to retain seasoned acquisition employees occupying critical acquisition positions.

Findings Connections to Conceptual Framework and Literature

In the context of employee retention strategies, the central theme of a positive organizational environment/culture aligns with the conceptual framework of the SET. Ristino and Michalak's (2018) findings indicated that the perception of a negative environment significantly impacts employees' intent to leave. It aligns with the conceptual framework as the findings showed; focus group participants, benefactors of a positive culture, cited a positive organizational culture as a strategy that fosters their intent to stay in an organization. FP5 stated, "It's the culture of the environment that is attractive to people, and that helps retain people, and that's what brought me here."

Hence, the attributes assigned to a positive work environment by managers and focus group participants support a mutually reciprocating exchange of the provision of a positive work environment by midlevel managers at the job level and a reciprocating response of organizational commitment and productivity.

The construct of environment and its subthemes of respect, communication, support, and trust, attributes assigned to a positive environment, is congruent with studies in the literature review. Holzwarth et al. (2021) research showed a significant relationship between employees' intent to stay and their work environment. Ushakov and Shatila's (2021) quantitative study assessed the impact of workplace culture on employee retention. Organizational support was a vital construct of the study's model. Ushakov and Shatila's findings also showed a significant correlation between workplace culture, motivation, and retention. Moreover, the findings suggested that the work environment is the most critical element of employee retention.

My research findings also support the findings of Nowrouzi-Kia and Fox's (2020) quantitative study examining the relationship between work environment factors (job satisfaction, flexible interprofessional relationships, the hospital's teaching status, region, and resource availability) and acute care nurses' intent to leave. Nowrouzi-Kia and Fox used surveys to collect data from a sample of 1,427 registered nurses employed by hospitals in Ontario, Canada. Based on their research findings, Nowrouzi-Kia and Fox indicated that job satisfaction, flexible interprofessional collaborative relationships, and resource availability had a significant relationship with nurses' intent to leave. As such, managers seeking to implement successful retention strategies should start with assessing

the work environment/culture at the job level and obtain input from employees to ensure that managers implement a mutually reciprocating strategy.

Theme 2: Employee Engagement

Employee engagement was managers' second most referenced strategy for retaining seasoned acquisition employees. Within the context of employee engagement, based on the frequency of reference, midlevel federal acquisition managers deemed getting to know their employees as the most significant element of employee engagement, followed by employees getting to know others in the organization. Conversely, employee engagement emerged as the fourth most referenced theme for focus group participants.

Like managers, focus group participants prioritized managers getting to know employees over getting to know others on the team. Although employee engagement was a primary theme for focus group participants, the findings imply that the difference in ranking the five primary emerging themes between managers and employees results from employees' having a greater affinity for retention strategies that align with the emerging themes of leadership and work-life balance ahead of employee engagement as a retention strategy. See Table 3 for subthemes and frequency of reference in the context of retention.

Table 3

Engagement Subthemes and Frequency

Themes	Number of references	Percentage of references
Managers		
Engagement	57	43%
Engagement/get to know employee/inclusion	55	42%
Engagement/opportunities for employee-employee	20	15%
Total	132	100%
Focus group		
Engagement/employee/inclusion	14	61%
Engagement	7	30%
Engagement/opportunities for employee-employee	2	9%
Total	23	100%

Subthemes

Getting to Know Employee/Inclusion. Within the context of employee

engagement, based on the frequency of reference, midlevel federal acquisition managers

deemed getting to know their employees, which fosters a sense of inclusion, as a critical

attribute of employee engagement. Managers noted that employee engagement must be

intentional and include one-on-one engagements where managers seek to know

employees on a personal and professional level, including what is important to

employees, for example, family, pets, and goals. Some managers indicated that getting to

know employees facilitates personalization to include personalized support, as getting to

know the employee provides the manager with a better understanding of what motivates

the employee and what the employee values. MP6 expressed the value of getting to know

the employee as an essential criterion for implementing effective retention strategies

stating:

Get to know your people. Ask your people what do you wake up for in the

morning and what things make you want to go back to bed. What are the things

about the job that gets your juices flowing? What things make you not want to do

it [the job]? If you know those two things about your people, you can give them

more of the good. You can't always take away the bad, but you can give them

more of the good.

Similarly, MP4 shared the criticality of job-level managers getting to know their

employees, knowing what motivates them and what they value. MP4 noted, "Once you

get to know your seasoned employees, if you're a good manager, you sort of understand

what makes them tick."

While the hierarchy of employee engagement among the primary emerging

themes differed between the two participant groups, my analysis identified similar

findings regarding the critical fundamental elements of employee engagement. Focus

group participants' assessment of the fundamental elements of employee engagement

supports managers' assessment of the importance of leader-member engagements and

connectedness, which fosters inclusion. Each focus group participant championed the

significance of engagement. FP2 addressed the necessity of the manager-employee

engagement dynamic in implementing retention strategies, as both sides must benefit

from the strategy. Elaborating, FP2 discussed how interpersonal relationships between

job-level management and employees could contribute to continuous improvements

through employee feedback.

Relationships within the Organization. In addition to manager-employee engagement, managers also cited the importance of employee-employee engagement. More specifically, getting to know peers within the organization. Managers noted that facilitating opportunities for employees to engage with other employees and developing relationships with other employees in the organization also enhances retention. MP6 conveyed the importance of getting to know employees and others within the team, saying both are critical to retaining seasoned acquisition employees, stating:

> Relationships and connections with supervisors and peers go a long way in making people want to stay. You don't have to be best friends at work, but you've got to know that somebody cares about you, and you care about somebody else.

MP6 also posited that managers should encourage and create opportunities for people to get to know each other.

As for employee engagement in a virtual work environment, managers voiced different perspectives. While MP6 credits access to IT resources that facilitated virtual engagement spaces during the height of COVID, MP6 touted the in-office experience as a better avenue to support team engagement experiences such as birthday celebrations and lunch. On the other hand, MP2 lauded the virtual environment as increasing opportunities for employee engagement. MP2 shared that a virtual work environment allows managers and co-workers to meet in a virtual environment with multiple employees, increasing opportunities to meet and making it more convenient for all parties.

FP3 and FP5 commented on the team dynamic of engagement under the predication of job-level managers' accountability for mitigating related issues. Hence,

focus group participants championed relationships within the organization, highlighting employees whose engagements were not conducive to a positive work environment. Thus, I will discuss this aspect under the context of the theme of manager/leadership.

Organizational Documents

The organization's public documentation on workplace strategy initiatives denotes its information technology as a communication infrastructure. In the documentation, technology is described as the foundation of workplace strategy and allows for agility in the receiving, processing, and sharing of work and ideas both inside and outside of the office. Moreover, according to the agency, the technologies allow federal employees to work where they need to work as opposed to where they are supposed to work. This finding supports the agency's commitment to employee engagement as its information technology collaboration tools deliver the virtual platform that facilitates employee engagement in a virtual environment. Collaboration tools support MP3 and MP1's position of staying connected in a virtual environment and collaborating to build good relationships.

Findings Connections to Conceptual Framework and Literature

Social exchange theorists theorized that exchanges are predicated on the value of the exchange (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). Manager-employee engagement and employee-employee engagement are relationships within the engagement. Thus, engagements within an organization are fundamental to the concept of organizational social exchanges. Accordingly, if an employee perceives the cost of the exchange to outweigh the benefit (profit) of the exchange, rather than reciprocating a

negative engagement, or a series of unpleasant engagements, the employee terminates the relationship (Yin, 2018). Thus, the intent to leave increases. Additionally, positive employee engagement facilitates the construct of trust in the conceptual framework.

Just as research supports the alignment of the engagement concept with constructs from the SET, research supports the congruency of the findings with existing peer-reviewed literature. Pandita and Kumar's (2022) study to enhance the understanding of job engagement drivers on generation z findings indicated that perceived supervisor support fostered a sense of inclusion and significantly impacted employee engagement and productivity. Additionally, the connectedness and relationships within the organization between manager-employee and employee-employee align with the construct of job embeddedness (Holtom et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2001). Holtom et al. and Mitchell et al. posited that attachment to links (formal or informal ties to groups and people) in the organization and the sacrifices (material and psychological cost) to leave their jobs and to give up link when job fit is also present equates to job embeddedness of why people stay. Hence, managers seeking to retain seasoned employees should intentionally engage employees and facilitate opportunities for employee-employee engagements to increase retention rates.

Theme 3: Job Satisfaction

My analysis showed that job satisfaction was the third most referenced theme for midlevel acquisition managers. In contrast, job satisfaction was the least referenced theme among the five primary emerging themes for focus group members. Emerging subthemes for both groups were opportunities for advancement, pay, and meaningful

work (job fit) with the same hierarchical ranking but different frequency percentages.

Minor themes incorporated in subthemes included recognition/monetary awards,

advancement, promotions, goals, and autonomy. See Table 4.

Table 4

Job Satisfaction Subthemes and Frequency

Subthemes	Number of references	Percentage of references
Managers		
Opportunities for advancement	69	52%
Pay/recognition	45	34%
Job fit (meaningful work)	18	14%
Total	132	100%
Focus group		
Opportunities for advancement	13	65%
Pay/recognition	5	25%
Job fit (meaningful work)	2	10%
Total	20	100%

Subthemes

Advancement/Promotion. Career goals, training, and development were minor

themes under the primary theme of job satisfaction. Advancement and promotions were

the most referenced attributes in the job satisfaction framework. MP3 shared that

"employees must have a clear path for advancement/promotions." Under the constructs of

communication and a positive environment, managers believe that understanding an

employee's goals and desires for advancement aids in personalizing retention strategies.

According to managers, communication and intentionally getting to know employees are

the key to knowing and understanding employees' goals, training needs, and desired

developmental opportunities.

Focus group participants shared that managers remembering their conversations concerning their goals and plans for advancement and offering resources to facilitate the employee's achievement generates perceived support and caring from their managers. Critical elements were (a) the manager intentionally engaging the employee to understand the employee's goals better, (b) remembering vital elements of the conversation, and (c) following up to deliver training opportunities or connecting the employee with other resources to achieve their goals. FP1 stated: "Managers should be proactive to address what motivates employees; that keeps good employees. If employees can express what motivates them, managers should try to meet the need." Similarly, FP2 posited:

> Supervisors who wish to maintain employees should be willing to put forth the effort to elevate those employees beyond where they are. …Successful supervisors must be willing and able to not only grow the individual employees but also see them promoted up and possibly out of their organization.

Focus group participants shared that the trade-off was the word-of-mouth advertisement as to the company's brand and culture, which will facilitate the recruitment of top talent. Focus group participants also advocated educational incentives as an element of advancement, promotions, and goals.

Pay/Recognition. Recognition and monetary awards were subthemes and minor themes under the primary theme of job satisfaction. Recognition was the second most referenced subtheme, as managers perceive that employees like recognition even if they do not desire public recognition in a large setting. MP3 stated, "recognition is a big part

of retention strategies, and when tasks differ based on duties, managers have to seek out opportunities to give recognition." Managers also noted that a manager must recognize employees based on their preferences so that employees perceive the value of the recognition. MP6 stated, "Recognition lets employees know they are appreciated/valued, recognize what they did, but consider how they want to be recognized because everyone is different." Managers suggested that employee engagement and dyadic communication are avenues to get to know employees and their preferred recognition approach.

The salary was the least discussed aspect of job satisfaction. Managers considered pay as a strategy under monetary awards. Managers noted that employees must perceive monetary awards as fair. If managers give equal recognition to mediocre or low-performing employees, the value of the recognition depreciates, and its effectiveness as a retention strategy diminishes.

Like managers, focus group participants' second most referenced subtheme in the context of job satisfaction was pay, with recognition being the most prevalent minor pay theme. Also, in alignment with managers' perspectives, the salary was the least discussed aspect of job satisfaction. These findings are congruent with the findings for managers. Although I did not gather demographics for this study, it is plausible that the senior level of participating focus group members and the federal employee GS pay system negates an added pay value beyond a monetary award.

Meaningful Work/Job Fit/Autonomy. Meaningful work was the least referenced subtheme in the context of job satisfaction by managers and focus group participants. However, managers emphasized meaningful work and connecting

employees to the mission as a retention strategy. MP4 indicated, "Some like high visibility work, others don't. For those that like high visibility work, give them high visibility work; it makes them appreciate the work more. Others prefer consistent workloads." Expounding on meaningful work and getting to know your employee, MP4 suggested, "Allow people to be themselves. Putting more outgoing employees in positions to utilize those skills is rewarding for them. For the more introverted employees, you have to account for that, where they fit, how they fit, and make them comfortable." Both managers noted that managers find out what work is rewarding for employees through employee engagement and dyadic communication.

MP6 and MP1 linked job fit and workload balance to retention. MP6 noted that clarifying misconceptions about the nature of the work at the job level could enhance retention. MP6 further noted clarifying misconceptions about the pace of the work and the varying levels of work complexity as a strategy to enhance job fit and intent to stay. Similarly, MP1 linked job satisfaction to workload balance and retirement eligibility. Addressing workload balance, MP1 discussed the provision and use of innovative and automated resources such as Bots (software applications to reduce some aspects of the workload). MP2 also championed the provision and use of resources such as contracted help to prevent excessive workloads.

MP1 also shared a strategy to improve the nature of acquisition work and stay ahead of knowledge lost when retires exit. Accordingly, MP1 noted the strategies of communication and engagement to foster a transfer of institutional knowledge, especially knowledge applicable to existing acquisitions and clients. Through communication and

engagement, MP1 noted the strategy of gathering institutional information from seasoned employees to generate resources for others to perform their duties, as sharing and saving acquisition knowledge as resources for others provides a historical perspective.

Focus group participants' findings reflect a reference to meaningful work in the context of job fit. FP5 focused on job fit considerations when hiring a new employee noting that poor job fit is inconsistent with employee retention suggesting engagement that facilitates a better perception of job fit for new hires and transferring employees. FP5 stated, "I think one thing that helps us retain good people is the type of people we hire into the organization." Hence managers should ensure that potential new hires have a realistic perception of the nature of the job.

Organizational Documents

An analysis of the organization's public document "Why Work Here" yielded findings of documents supporting the organization's commitment to job satisfaction. The documentation denotes the provision of work incentives offered to employees. A few of the incentives listed included: training/career development opportunities, flexible work schedules, and, in many locations, on-site fitness centers, health clinics, and childcare centers. These incentives are consistent with strategies that support employee retention, and the agency's commitment to job satisfaction aligns with job satisfaction initiatives as a retention strategy.

Findings Connections to Conceptual Framework and Literature

Job satisfaction is a value construct in the framework of the SET. Based on the social exchange equation of the value or benefit from an exchange driving the

employee's reciprocating behavior, job satisfaction enhances employee commitment to the organization and productivity. Thus, subtheme concepts such as advancement, recognition, pay or other monetary rewards, job fit, and workload balance engender some degree of employee satisfaction and increase productivity (Muhammad et al., 2021). Hence, an employee's satisfaction with a subtheme concept can influence an employee's intent to leave and productivity.

My research findings link to several academic and practitioner research findings in the retention literature. Al Mamun and Hasan's (2017) research identified causes and factors influencing employee turnover and strategies for increasing employee retention and minimizing employee turnover. Low salary and the relationship between fit and job were two factors identified as contributing to employee turnover. Al Mamun and Hasan's strategies to increase retention rates included recruiting suitable employees, retaining valuable employees, having effective leadership, providing training and development, job satisfaction, a good organizational culture, and balancing work and family life. Muhammad et al. (2021) research also links to the findings as their study indicated workload correlates with turnover as excessive workloads increase stress and employees' intent to leave. Thus, based on the findings, managers valuing their most significant asset, human capital, should strive to implement retention strategies that stimulate job satisfaction.

Theme 4: Work-Life Balance

The theme of work-life balance was the fourth most frequent theme for managers. Work-life balance strategies, initiatives that enhance an employee's ability to balance

work commitments and personal and family needs, were also the fourth most referenced theme by focus group participants. Flexible work schedules and environments were the most referenced subtheme attributed to the work-life balance framework. A balanced workload that contributes to work-life balance was the other subtheme. The workload balance subtheme overlaps with the job satisfaction subtheme. Although managers' and focus group participants' findings yielded the same subthemes, the hierarchy of importance was reversed. See Table 5 for subthemes and frequency of reference.

Table 5

Work-life Balance Subthemes and Frequency

Subthemes	Number of references	Percentage of references
Managers		
Work-life balance/flexible schedule & exercise time	65	57%
Work-life balance/workload	50	43%
Total	115	100%
Focus group		
Work-life balance/workload	16	59%
Work-life balance/flexible schedule/fitness time	11	41%
Total	27	100%

Subthemes

Flexible Work Environment and Schedules. Flexible work environments such as remote work, telework, and flexible schedules that allow employees to work an alternate work schedule rather than a traditional fixed work schedule enable better work-life balance. Even though managers regarded flexible work attributes and balanced workloads as important retention traits, managers viewed flexible work environments and work schedules as a more impactful retention strategy than a balanced workload.

MP1, MP2, MP3, and MP6 advocated the significance of work-life balance afforded through flexible work environments and schedules, linking the significance to increased employee-family time. MP3 noted that flexible work environments and schedules could carry a higher incentive than external promotion opportunities. MP3's assertion is plausible as flexible work environments and schedules might outweigh the value of an external promotion requiring a daily commute. As a minor theme of flexible work schedules, MP3 cited a flexible work schedule that supports exercise time as a retention strategy that supports employees' well-being.

Focus group participants shared an equivalent outlook. FP4 and FP5 advocated the significance of flexible work environments and schedules, noting that schedules such as 4-10s (working 4 days a week, 10 hours a day) as highly desirable retention incentives. Like MP3, FP5 supported fitness time, the same as exercise time as a retention strategy.

Workloads. Although managers deemed workload balance necessary, they deemed it a less impactful retention strategy than work-life balance. MP1 mentioned respecting employee work hours outside of core work hours as a strategy to facilitate workload balance and work-life balance. MP1 noted scaling back meetings during workload escalation periods. MP1 also stated, "Here [the organization], one of the things that we are very strict about is we don't bother people before their time [start time], and we leave them alone when they're off the clock."

Unlike managers, focus group participants' most frequently referenced subtheme was a balanced workload. The difference in the hierarchy might be attributable to the ease of access to flexible work options as employees enter the organization with flexible

work options. Furthermore, a balanced workload also supports work-life balance. An unexpected minor theme of workloads addressed by focus group participants included the timely filling of vacated positions to minimize temporary periods of increased workloads.

Organizational Documents

A review of the organization's document Work/Life Balance and Wellness on the agency's official website showed that the agency provides employee work-life balance resources. The site reflects the availability of flexible work schedules, childcare resources, and telework. The introductory statement on the document denotes, "We understand the balancing act between work and personal life. [The agency] helps restore the balance by offering family-friendly health and wellness benefits that give you flexibility and peace of mind." Work-life balance opportunities also contribute to perceived organizational support (Berkery et al., 2020). Thus, the organization's Work/Life Balance and Wellness initiatives are congruent with the retention strategy of work-life balance.

Findings Connections to Conceptual Framework and Literature

Work-life balance connects to the study's SET conceptual framework and links to peer-reviewed literature. My findings connect to the conceptual framework of the SET as work-life balance, and its subthemes of flexible work environments and work schedules are beneficial to employees. Employees value the opportunity to spend more time with family and the convenience of balancing the care of family and personal needs with work. Accordingly, in the equation of the SET of reciprocating exchanges, employees

value the profit of work-life balance and reciprocate with increased motivation and performance.

My findings also link to the literature. For example, using constructs from the SET, Yu (2019) utilized a mixed-method research design to identify reasons for employees' turnover intentions and family-friendly policies that reduce employees' intent to leave the organization. Using sampling, Yu collected data via an online survey containing quantitative and qualitative questions emailed to the work accounts of 1,111 federal female law enforcement officers employed by the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Participants included single, married, divorced, and women residing with partners and ranged in age from 26-59 years old, either with or without children. Yu's research indicated that although family-friendly programs were valued, responses differed among parental needs. Of the five family-friendly policies identified, women with children favored family-friendly policies that supported child-care initiatives. Similarly, single mothers favored flexible work initiatives, mainly part-time employment. Yu's findings also support tailoring retention incentives to increase retention rates further.

The literature also supports telework as a family-friendly program that fosters employee work-life balance. For example, Choi (2020) conducted a quantitative longitudinal study to examine the impact of telework on voluntary turnover. Using telework data from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management congressional reports and the Central Personnel Data files, Choi sampled 143 subagencies and 15 executive branch

departments. The study's findings suggested that telework reduces turnover, thus, increasing the retention rate.

Theme 5: Leadership/Manager

Leadership at the job level was the fifth most referenced major theme by managers identified in the findings. Emerging subthemes included motivating employees and accountability. In contrast to findings based on managers' data, leadership at the job level was the second most referenced major theme identified by focus group participants. Similar to the findings for managers, subthemes included motivating employees and accountability. The hierarchy of importance of the subtheme was consistent between the managers and focus group participants. See Table 6 for the frequency of reference.

Table 6

Leadership Subthemes and Frequency

Subthemes	Number of references	Percentage of references
Manager		
Leadership motivation	73	78%
Accountability	20	22%
Total	93	100%
Focus group		
Leadership motivation	34	74%
Accountability	12	26%
Total	46	100%

Subthemes

Motivation. Managers and focus group participants' data yielded similar attributes of job-level managers' leadership strategies to retain seasoned employees. Managers' data reflected that leadership attributes encapsulate many attributes in the

positive work environment and its subthemes concepts. MP6 and MP5 suggested that managers communicate with employees and engage them one-on-one to discover what motivates them. MP6 and MP5 also posited finding different ways to motivate employees.

Focus group participants' findings also yielded encapsulated attributes of the positive work environment. FP3 tied motivation with managers establishing a positive work culture, noting:

The atmosphere in which you work, the culture...because even if you are working hard, if you work with good people and you know everybody is motivated and pulling their weight, people stay. I mean, they will stay and never retire if they didn't have to.

Supporting FP3's claim, FP5 stated:

Leaders/supervisors should create an environment that brings out the best in people to motivate them to do better than they usually do and to grow them, ... and the supervisor happily supports that because they want their people to succeed.

In addition, focus group participants also unanimously agreed that a leader, specifically job-level leaders, should get to know employees to tailor motivation strategies as one motivates one employee might not motivate others.

Accountability. Managers' data produced an overarching theme of managerial accountability. The findings indicated that managers hold themselves accountable for creating positive work environments, providing needed resources, growing and

motivating employees, treating employees as individuals, allowing employees to be their authentic selves, and leading teams to produce positive outcomes, so the employee and the organization reap benefits. Championing the role of leadership, MP5 cited two primary mottos and guiding principles, noting:

> My biggest motto when I'm in a leadership position is that if my people fail, it's because I failed them. So, I hold that dear to my heart, and I make sure that everyone has the tools they need to get where they need to go. Furthermore, it's all going to be different. I got to give my people talk cover … they need to focus on the work and their responsibilities, and my job is to ensure they can.

Along that line, MP3 noted aligning leadership practices with proven leadership principles.

Focus group participants' findings resonated with aspects of finding from managers' data. Similar to behaviors discussed by managers in leadership and employee retention attributes, focus group participants encapsulated valuing employees as intellectual assets and investing in employees in a respectful environment in their leadership framework. FP1 stated:

> I define effectiveness as a leader as when the leader is able to kind of cross that bridge and say, I value you as a worker, but I also value what you want to do personally and what's going on in your life, and that enables me to express to them this is where I want to go. This is what I want to do, and I believe you can help me, and I'll trust you with what I want to do.

An unexpected minor theme of managers holding poor-performing employees accountable and disruptive employees accountable also emerged. Focus group participants voiced that managers holding employees accountable for not contributing to the team's productivity aid in fostering a positive environment and motivating contributing employees.

Organizational Documents

My document analysis for the leadership theme included a public document produced by the Partnership for Public Service, which gathers data to rank the best places to work in the federal government. The agency adopted data from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. In the 2021 report, the case study agency ranked among midsize federal agencies in the top quartile of best places to work in the federal government. A further breakdown reflected the agency's "effective leadership: supervisors" ranking in the top quartile. The data supports organizational practices that promote effective leadership that contribute to leaders capable of implementing and administering effective retention strategies.

Findings Connections to Conceptual Framework and Literature

Leadership is a critical construct in the SET framework. The actions of leaders, especially job-level leaders, are viewed not only in the context of their leadership role but also in the context of the organization's brand, as employees view them as the face of the organization (Covella et al., 2017). Subsequently, most exchanges and reciprocating actions are between the job-level leader and the employee. Thus, in the context of the

SET, job-level leaders and employees are the pivotal parties in the exchange. Accordingly, my findings link to the conceptual framework for my study.

Moreover, my findings link to the literature as retention studies identify leadership as an antecedent of employee retention. Additionally, Pandita and Kumar's (2022) findings support the significant relationship between employee retention and perceived supervisor support. Similarly, Covella et al. (2017) retention study examining leadership's role in employee retention assessed person-job fit, turnover intentions, and employee work engagement in the context of leader-employee exchanges. The findings offer empirical evidence to support that positive exchanges between leaders and followers reduce employee turnover. Hence, leaders should ensure that managers possess the knowledge and skills to develop and maintain a positive work environment, develop and motivate employees, engage in dyadic communication with all employees under their supervision, and move employees to perform and retain them. As FP1 shared, "leadership must set up the leaders with the right resources, with the right mentality, with the right intention of grooming people underneath them and retaining them."

Applications to Professional Practice

In my study, I aimed to better understand successful retention strategies used by midlevel acquisition managers to retain seasoned acquisition employees. The lens to understand the findings is the SET which theorizes that the value of exchanges between employees and leadership (also the face of the organization) impacts employee retention. Accordingly, the findings of this study are relevant to professional employee retention practices as a framework for successful retention strategies benefits for large and small

businesses and for-profit and non-profit businesses. Moreover, successful retention strategies are vital to the success of an organization as successful retention strategies mitigate the loss of institutional and tacit knowledge, capability gaps, decreased productivity, excessive workloads, and diminished motivation (Corbin, 2020). Additionally, these factors impact an organization's brand as the decrease in the quality of work impacts customer satisfaction, the client base, revenues, the organization's greatest asset, human capital, and the talent pool it offers. The less-than-optimal performance also impacts the organization's competitive advantage.

Managers reading this study may better understand the nature of exchanges in an organization and the implications of positive and negative exchanges on employee retention. Findings from the study illuminate positive retention strategies attributes foundational to: (a) a positive organizational environment, (b) intentional employee engagement, (c) job satisfaction, (d) work-life balance, and (e) effective leadership, the five emerging themes of successful retention strategies. Moreover, the identified strategies, characteristics of the strategies, ways to implement the strategies, and insight to measure the effectiveness of the strategies provide a blueprint for successful retention strategies. Accordingly, managers reading this study might also gain insight into implementing strategies that retain critical position employees and high performing employees such as seasoned employees.

Implications for Social Change

The study's findings have positive implications for individuals, communities, organizations, institutions, cultures, and society. For individuals, increasing retention

using the strategies identified in the findings might: (a) facilitate safer and more inclusive

work environments, (b) increase opportunities for individuals to address non-work-

related needs for themselves and family members, and (c) improve overall well-being

through increased job satisfaction. Moreover, institutions and organizations that increase

the retention of employees might reallocate a portion of the savings from decreased

expenses associated with recruiting and training new employees to initiatives intended to

advance social causes, such as eliminating barriers that contribute to healthcare

disparities. Retaining federal acquisition employees facilitates a mission-ready workforce

ready to execute contracts for supplies, services, and construction to aid communities in

their recovery from the impact of natural disasters. Thus, retaining federal acquisition

employees may improve the federal response to natural disasters and humanitarian

support initiatives on a local, national, and international level benefiting different cultures

and societies.

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Recommendations for Action

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Managers need successful retention strategies to retain the organization's most

valuable asset, its employees. Employees are foundational to a successful organization as

they perform work and possess institutional and tacit knowledge that drives an

organization's efficiency, performance outcomes, and competitive edge (Corbin, 2020;

Nayak et al., 2021). Accordingly, leaders should incorporate and practice successful

retention strategies in the organization's strategic plan.

When organizations fail to implement successful retention strategies,

organizations lose valuable assets when seasoned employees voluntarily leave the

organization. Hence turnover increases while productivity, revenue, and customer satisfaction decline. Moreover, managers risk occasional periods of collective turnover (the loss of multiple employees simultaneously or within a short time), heightening the impact of low retention rates (Seo et al., 2018). As such, management should implement and practice successful retention strategies to mitigate these adverse outcomes.

As the actions of job-level managers have the most significant impact on retention, managers are responsible for using successful retention strategies and maximizing the likelihood of employee retention based on factors influenced by managers. As this study's findings suggest, managers are responsible for implementing successful retention strategies, such as a positive work environment that motivate employees and increase their intent to stay. As such, managers must have open and honest communication with employees and intentional manager-employee engagement that enables the manager to get to know the employee as it helps the manager motivate the employee, contributes to establishing job satisfaction, and engenders trust (Prasetyo et al., 2021). Engagement is also vital as it fosters a sense of inclusiveness and engenders teamwork. Furthermore, managers must recognize the value of seasoned employees' institutional and tacit knowledge as it fosters a sense of respect and contributions to the missions and cultivates relationships within teams that influence knowledge sharing (Nayak et al., 2021). Sarti's (2018) research findings support this assertion as Sarti conducted a single case study to investigate the significance of employee tenure on knowledge. Sarti based the conceptual framework on constructs from the SET and the leader-member exchange theory. Analyzing data from a 90-question survey given to 150

employees from a non-profit organization in Italy, Sarti's results suggested that when employees perceived leader-member exchange to be positive, employees with tenure were more amenable to knowledge sharing. As such, managers reading this study might benefit from its findings on successful retention strategies as it could enable them to maximize the value of their most significant asset, increase job satisfaction, and facilitate a win-win relationship for the employee and the organization. I will facilitate access to this study's results by disseminating the results via email, publications, literature, hosting a training, group sessions, and open discussions.

Recommendations for Further Research

Although the results of this study suggest practical applications for successful retention strategies and contribute to the literature, it has limitations. One limitation is the inclusion of only midlevel acquisition managers at the job level. The inclusion of participants from only one agency presents another limitation. Both limitations prevent the generalization of the findings. On the other hand, these limitations present paths for future research. Hence, researchers might explore successful retention strategies using a multiple case study design with participants from different agencies. Other future research paths include a qualitative study using a similar framework emphasizing demographics. Demographics might include years in job-level managerial positions and junior-level employees with lower pay grades. This demographic is important as employees invest time and money in developing new employees and interns, and retaining them enhances future talent pools (Lee et al., 2018). Researchers might also consider using a mixed-method methodology to assess causality. Future research might

also focus on retirement-eligible employees to explore flexible work schedules, including part-time employment and tailored benefit plans for seasoned employees with a wealth of institutional and tacit knowledge. The findings might result in tailored retention strategies for retirees that facilitates their ability to care for aging parents or enjoy a work-life balance that aligns better with a retirement-eligible population.

Reflections

My journey to becoming a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) has been an experience characterized by self-reflection and professional and personal growth. Interestingly, my education from DBA courses addressed researcher bias, self-reflection to mitigate bias, and the lens from which we interpret things. Striving not to be biased in my research, especially since I work in the field of federal acquisitions, I focused on my subjective assessments based on the lens of my experiences and preferences using reflective journaling, endeavoring not to apply my lens to the actions, communications, and experiences of participants. By doing so, I am more reflective. My growth benefited my research, mitigating bias in my research, general and business conversations with others, and instances of subjective judgment. Thus, I improved my ability to mitigate biases that might stem from my experiences. As a result, my research design which facilitated a dialogue with participants to better understand participants' experiences from their perspective, made my research experience a more valuable and rewarding journey.

Conclusion

Organizations desiring a competitive advantage, a superior brand, high-performing employees, and satisfied customers and employees must ensure that they have

retention strategies to retain seasoned employees. Research supports the indispensable value of human capital (DeMotta et al., 2019). Muthuveloo et al. (2017) posited that human capital's tacit knowledge is more valuable than financial capital. As seasoned employees afford organizations additional institutional knowledge and tacit knowledge, retention strategies that mitigate their intent to leave should be a part of an organizational strategic plan and guiding principles. Furthermore, leaders should reassess their strategic retention plan, engaging employees to assess the alignment of stated plans with managers' actions for win-win outcomes for employees and the organization.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
What I will do	**What I will say—script**
Introduce the interview and set the stage	Script Good afternoon/evening. My name is Patricia Wells; I am a doctoral student at Walden University, pursuing a doctoral degree in business administration. Thank you so very much for your interest in my doctoral study. Your interview will help me complete my research.
● Watch for non-verbal queues ● Paraphrase as needed ● Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth	1. What strategies did you use to improve the retention of seasoned acquisition employees in your organization?
	2. How did you measure the effectiveness of your strategies to retain seasoned acquisition employees?
	3. What strategies did you find that worked best to retain seasoned acquisition employees?
	4. What key challenges to implementing the successful strategies did you encounter?
	5. How did you address the key challenges to implementing the successful strategies for retaining seasoned acquisition employees?
	6. What additional information can you share about the strategies you used to retain seasoned acquisition employees?
Wrap up interview thanking participant	This concludes my questions. Thank you very much for taking the time to assist me in my research by sharing your experience using strategies that retain seasoned acquisition employees.
Schedule follow-up member checking interview	Script To ensure that I bring authenticity to your voice, I want to schedule a follow-up member checking interview to allow you to review my synthesized interpretation of the interview for accuracy. Based on your preference, we can schedule a virtual follow-up, or you can respond to the synthesis via email.
Follow–up Member Checking Interview	
Introduce follow-up interview and set the stage	Script Thank you again for setting aside the time to review my interpretation of our previous interview.

Share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each question Bring in probing questions related to other information that you may have found—note the information must be related so that you are probing and adhering to the IRB approval. Walkthrough each question, read the interpretation, and ask: Did I miss anything? Or, What would you like to add?	Script I will read each question and my synthesis of the interpretation from your response during the interview. As we go through each question, I will allow you to inform me if I missed something or if you need me to add something.
	1. What strategies did you use to improve the retention of seasoned acquisition employees in your organization? *Synthesis of the interpretation:*
	2. How did you measure the effectiveness of your strategies to retain seasoned acquisition employees? *Synthesis of the interpretation:*
	3. What strategies did you find that worked best to retain seasoned acquisition employees? *Synthesis of the interpretation:*
	4. What key challenges to implementing the successful strategies did you encounter? *Synthesis of the interpretation:*
	5. How did you address the key challenges to implementing the successful strategies for retaining seasoned acquisition employees? *Synthesis of the interpretation:*
	6. What additional information can you share about the strategies you used to retain seasoned acquisition employees? *Synthesis of the interpretation:*

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Protocol	
What I will do	**What I will say—script**
Introduce the focus group and set the stage	Script Good afternoon/evening. My name is Patricia Wells. I am a doctoral student at Walden University, pursuing a doctoral degree in business administration. Thank you so very much for your interest in my doctoral study. Your participation will help me complete my research. Today I will moderate a focus group with acquisition employees supervised by midlevel acquisition managers who may or may not have participated in my individual interviews. I remind you that this focus group will be audio-recorded, and I will take notes to make sure that I capture your experiences and ideas. However, my audio recording and notes will remain confidential.
Ground Rules	 ● Please speak one at a time ● There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your perspectives ● You do not have to agree with the co-participant in the group unless you actually agree, as opinions might differ ● Feel comfortable expressing your perspective, be it positive or critical ● If you know co-participants, please do not disclose their names or the discussion content outside of this group, as this will support confidentiality.
● Watch for non-verbal queues ● Paraphrase as needed ● Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth	1. What strategies did your managers use to improve the retention of seasoned acquisition employees in your organization?
	2. How did you measure the effectiveness of the strategies to retain seasoned acquisition employees?
	3. What strategies work best to retain seasoned acquisition employees?
	4. What do you think are key challenges to implementing the successful strategies?
	5. How did managers address the key challenges to

	implementing the successful strategies for retaining seasoned acquisition employees?
	6. What additional information can you share about the strategies used to retain seasoned acquisition employees?
Wrap up interview thanking participant	This concludes my questions. Thank you very much for assisting me in my research by participating in the focus group.

Appendix C: Initial Interview Invitation

Initial Interview Invitation

RE: Doctoral Study That May Be of Interest Recruitment Invite Announcement

Patricia Wells is currently collecting data for a research study as a requirement for a doctoral degree from Walden University. Although employed as a Contract Specialist/Contracting Officer at [Name of Agency], this study is separate from her role at [Name of Agency] and will be conducted outside of [Name of Agency] working hours.

The focus of the study is to explore successful strategies that midlevel federal acquisition managers use to enhance employee retention. The title of the study is Strategies to Retain Seasoned Federal Acquisition Employees. She is seeking the assistance of midlevel federal acquisition managers to participate in a 60 minute, six questions, one-on-one virtual, audio-recorded interview to highlight distinct perspectives in her research. The researcher's audio recording will be confidential.

The six questions will address the following:

- Strategies you use to improve your organization's retention
- How you measure the effectiveness of the retention strategies
- Strategies that work best to retain seasoned acquisition employees
- Your key challenges to implementing the successful strategies
- How you address the key challenges to implementing successful strategies
- Additional information you would like to share about the strategies used to retain seasoned acquisition employees

Participation is voluntary. This activity is not a [Name of Agency] activity, and it is not sponsored by [Name of Agency]. Your participation is not required by [Name of Agency] and is not a condition of your employment. Choosing to participate, or not to participate, will have no effect on your status as an employee of [Name of Agency] and participation will neither enhance nor degrade any employee performance ratings.

If you are interested in participating in this study, contact her at

patricia.wells1@waldenu.edu.

Appendix D: Initial Focus Group Invitation

Initial Focus Group Invitation

RE: Doctoral Study That May Be of Interest Focus Group Recruitment Invite

Announcement

Patricia Wells is currently collecting data for a research study as a requirement for a

doctoral degree from Walden University. Although employed as a Contract

Specialist/Contracting Officer at [Name of Agency], this study is separate from her role

at [Name of Agency] and will be conducted outside of [Name of Agency] working hours.

The focus of the study is to explore successful strategies that midlevel federal acquisition

managers use to enhance employee retention. The title of the study is Strategies to Retain

Seasoned Federal Acquisition Employees. She is seeking the assistance of six federal

acquisition employees of midlevel federal acquisition managers to participate in a 60-

minute virtual focus group discussion addressing six questions that invite a group

discussion regarding successful retention strategies employed by midlevel federal

acquisition managers within the organization to highlight the perspectives in the research.

The researcher's audio recording will be confidential.

The six focus group questions will address the following:

- Strategies your managers use to improve the retention of seasoned acquisition employees in your organization
- How you measure the effectiveness of the strategies
- Strategies that work best to retain seasoned acquisition employees

- Key challenges to implementing the successful strategies
- How managers address the key challenges to implementing successful strategies
- Additional information you can share about the strategies used to retain seasoned acquisition employees

Participation is voluntary. This activity is not a [Name of Agency] activity, and it is not sponsored by [Name of Agency]. Your participation is not required by [Name of Agency] and is not a condition of your employment. Choosing to participate, or not to participate, will have no effect on your status as an employee of [Name of Agency] and participation will neither enhance nor degrade any employee performance ratings.

If you are interested in participating in this study, contact her at

patricia.wells1@waldenu.edu.