

Whitepaper



**Workplace Relationship
Development Indicator**

Employee Engagement: A Much Abused Term!

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Engagement and Retention: Clarifying some Common Misconceptions

The Meaning of Engagement?

- The term “Employee Engagement” means entirely different things to different survey product providers, with tremendous variation in the scope and content of the construct.
- It is not a recognised academic construct, and empirical research into it is minimal.
- The jury is out as to whether the concept of Engagement (whatever definition is adopted), adds any more to the prediction of retention and performance, over and above the extensive empirical research on Commitment and Job Satisfaction.

The Empirical Research: Turnover and Performance

- Affective Commitment (i.e., emotional attachment to the organisation) and Job Satisfaction are the 2 key predictors of Intention to Stay (accounts for around 50% of the variance), with Intention to Stay being the main predictor of retention;
- Affective Commitment and Job Satisfaction are also 2 key predictors of performance, accounting for around 20 to 25% in performance variance;

Note: This means that proactively addressing retention also returns the dual benefit of enhanced performance.

- Affective Commitment and Job Satisfaction are also key predictors of Job Commitment or discretionary effort, together with the latter, but only weakly related to retention (or Intention to Stay);

Note: This means that those who are intending to leave, are unlikely to slacken off significantly, and conversely, those who are intending to stay are not necessarily working all that much harder.

Engagement Indexes – Psychometrically Flawed?

- Whilst the reporting of Engagement Indices is popular and intuitively appealing for managers, enabling them to make internal and external comparisons, the concept is potentially psychometrically flawed, as engagement and retention cannot be simply reduced down to and explained in terms of a single number.



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- Furthermore, the reporting of Engagement Indices has the potential to corrupt the survey process, particularly when managers' KPIs are linked to such indices.

Diagnostic Surveys are In

- Culture surveys are out and diagnostic engagement surveys are in. However, "oils ain't oils" when it comes to employee surveys – "growing your own" is likely to be a waste of time unless the tool has the right measures (based on empirical research), rigorous psychometric properties (valid and reliable), high diagnostic capability, with established norms for meaningful comparisons.

About Leaving Organisations and Associated \$ Costs

- **People leave organisations for any or all of the three 3 P's:**
 - **"Push"** (which accounts for around 60% of leavers), due to dysfunctional organisational factors (either local workplace issues or wider organisational issues or limitations, including selection and recruitment);
 - **"Pull"** (which accounts for around 20% of leavers), due a better external offer or "deal" (either the tangibles like pay or the intangibles such as career development); or
 - **"Personal"** (which accounts for around 20% of leavers), due to career, family, health, other interests, etc., primarily unrelated to the organisation;
- **Based on the above figures, immediate managers contribute to around 30% of total turnover, with a further 30% being attributed to job related (e.g., person – job fit), or wider organisational factors (e.g., top management leadership), which means around 60% of turnover lies more under the direct control of organisations.**
- **High performers are less likely to leave organisations than lower performers, and anecdotally, it requires at least a 20% pay increase (i.e., "Pull" effect), to entice a person who is happy in their job and with their organisation, for them to seriously consider leaving;**

Note: This means that organisations which have a highly aligned workforce have a potential 20% pay buffer advantage over their competitors.

- **The cost of turnover ranges from between 0.5 to 2.5 times the salary of the job in question (i.e., depends on the importance of the job), with around 80% of these costs being indirect or lag costs (i.e., don't show up immediately on the P & L statement).**



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Introduction

The HR metric of the moment is “employee engagement”. The reason for this current surge in interest is the strong link between **employee engagement** and **performance** and **retention** (which are critical business outcomes), against a background of imminent long term labour skills and talent shortages.

Never before has the need been greater for organisations and their people to be aligned. A failure to achieve this will most likely threaten the stability and sustainability of organisations, not to mention that other investments in various HR initiatives (e.g., leadership and talent development), may be problematic. The next decade and beyond will be very much about human capital and people management issues. Whilst HR is a key stakeholder, responsibility for addressing these challenges lies ultimately with executive management. Directors, CEOs, CFOs, and GMs will all inevitably be involved as human capital becomes very much a part of the boardroom agenda.

However, the territory of engagement and retention is a somewhat confused one, plagued with superficial abstractions, “pop psychology” and opinions. This article explores the concept of engagement, what it means, how it impacts upon performance and retention, how to measure it, and related empirical research.

Where do Engagement and Retention Fall in the Human Capital Model?

Human Capital = Employees’ Knowledge + Skills + Experience + Initiative = Competitive Advantage



Human capital can be increased by any of the 4 means in the above diagram. Currently the response of many companies to the labour shortage is more tactical than strategic, where their focus is predominantly on acquisition. It’s akin to providing a blood transfusion first rather than stopping or minimising the bleeding! Maximising the contribution (and retention) of people through effective people management policies and practices (i.e., utilising / engaging and retaining human capital in the above human capital model), also provides significant productivity upside potential (see empirical research findings later). This is the area of focus for this white paper.



The Business Case for Engaging and Retaining



The Turnover Cost Iceberg

The cost of turnover ranges from between 0.5 to 2.5 times the value of the job in question (Cascio, 1991, 1998), depending upon the importance of the job. Approximately 80% of these costs are indirect or lag costs (i.e., don't show up immediately on the P & L statement), but because they are "soft" rather than "hard" dollars, they tend not to be believed. Notwithstanding these costs, another turnover consideration for the future will be whether firms will be able to find suitable replacements? If not, this has implications regarding their future growth aspirations and ability to service existing, let alone new clients and markets. Consider the following example for key talent.

Assumptions:

- firm employs 1000 people;
- 5% are "critical mission" employees (i.e., 50 employees);
- annual turnover of 20%
- average salary package of 50 employees is 175k;
- turnover multiple is 2;

Annual cost of turnover is \$3,500,000

Reducing turnover from 20% back to 15% represents a saving of \$700,000 per annum.

Often it is the intangibles (leadership, career development, recognition, etc.), rather than the tangibles (e.g., pay), that contribute to turnover, so the cost of interventions are often minimal compared to the potential savings.



In addition to the above cost savings, there are performance and salary buffer benefits in proactively addressing retention (see later). **John Sullivan, the US based HR metrics guru, contends that retention offers the highest Return on Investment of any HR initiative.**

In addressing turnover, it is important to understand why people typically leave organisations, which include any or all of the three “Ps”:

- the **“Push”** effect which relates to perceived organisational dysfunctional factors or limitations, and which typically accounts for around 60% of departures;
- the **“Pull”** effect which relates to perceived better external opportunities or “deals”, and which typically accounts for around 20% of departures; or
- **“Personal”** reasons which are unrelated to the organisation (e.g., health, family, travel, career change, etc.), and which typically accounts for around 20% of departures.

Note:

1. The above % split of reasons for leaving has been derived from a variety of sources and the authors own anecdotal observations. This data is notoriously difficult to validate as the reasons that people give for leaving are not always reflective of the underlying causes (people may not necessarily be honest because of issues around confidentiality), and the framework for the classification of these reasons is not uniform.

2. With the growth of search firms, and the ongoing talent shortage, it is likely that organisations will become much more susceptible to poaching of their talent and the “Pull” effect. It will become even more important for organisations to regularly survey their key talent to monitor retention risk and catch and address this risk early on in the process.

Organisations can thus directly influence around 60% of turnover, which in the case of the above example, translates into a cost of \$2,100,000. Approximately 50% of departures within the “Push” Effect are related to perceived problems with immediate bosses or supervisors, with the other 50% relating to job (e.g., person – job fit), or wider organisational issues (e.g., top management leadership). Whilst local management may be a significant cause of turnover (contributing to around an overall 30%), there is no “silver bullet” or single “fix”. The causes and solutions to turnover are multi-dimensional and more complex. Thus the popular misconception about people leaving organisations predominantly because of bosses is very much overstated.

Furthermore, the process of leaving an organisation is typically a dynamic one (Mobely, Horner & Hollingsworth, 1978), where there may or may not be a trigger event (either work or personal related). In this process, an individual starts thinking about leaving, to then forming an intention to leave, to then taking action in terms of job searching, etc. This process is not irreversible – it is capable of being interrupted if the causes of disenchantment or preferences of the individual are known, and dealt with appropriately.



High performers are less likely to leave organisations than lower performers (refer empirical research findings later linking the 2 key drivers of retention to performance), and anecdotally, it requires at least a 20% pay increase (i.e., “Pull” effect), to entice a person who is happy in their job and with their organisation, for them to seriously consider leaving. **This means that organisations which have a highly aligned workforce have a potential 20% pay buffer advantage over their competitors.**

What is meant by the Term “Employee Engagement”?

The problem with this frequently used and fashionable term “engagement” is that it means completely different things to different survey providers, all of whom are trying to claim the same ground! **Engagement is not a recognized academic construct, with empirical research into it being minimal, unlike the related areas of commitment and job satisfaction.**

Some survey providers equate engagement with job satisfaction, whilst others equate engagement with emotional (i.e., affective) commitment to their organisation. Often the terms “engagement” and “retention” are used interchangeably. One well known international survey provider has a model of engagement based on local people management practices, which are reported to predict job satisfaction, whereas another popular international provider completely ignores job satisfaction in their model! Some providers also include discretionary effort or job commitment in their survey models. Others have invented new terms like “rational commitment” (including various forms), seemingly oblivious to the extensive empirical research on commitment and retention. In short, there is tremendous variation in the scope and content of the construct.

Human assets are generally less well understood and less well managed compared to other areas of the business. The lack of training of some HR professionals in measurement and psychometrics, and the gap between empirical research and some HR customs and practices, are significant contributing factors to this confusion. Furthermore, many survey providers are reluctant to reveal the psychometric properties of their tools (see later), and without this data, it is impossible to make comparisons between respective tools and models. **Therefore the jury is out as to whether the concept of Engagement (whatever definition is adopted), adds any more to the prediction of retention and performance, over and above the extensive empirical research on Commitment and Job Satisfaction.**



Measurement is Critical

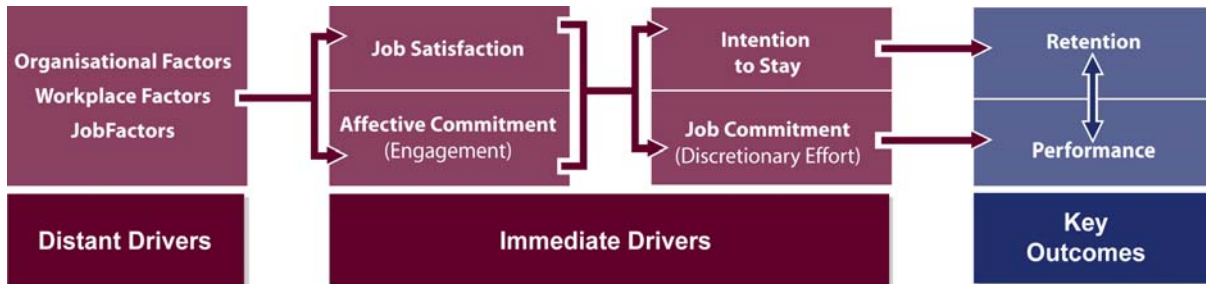


What gets measured gets managed! Without the right data, executives have an inadequate basis for informed decision making in managing their most vital intangible asset. The phrase that people are our greatest asset becomes empty rhetoric!

To put this in another context, if you were intending to assess the state of your health, you wouldn't omit key measures, and you would more than likely seek out a professional who uses a scientifically validated, comprehensive testing and diagnostic approach, which includes comparisons of your results with those of the general population (see About Engagement Surveys later).

In the era of labour shortages, measuring, diagnosing and reporting on key drivers of performance and retention with surgical precision are essential for people investment decisions, investment tracking, continuous improvement monitoring, and managing risk. Ultimately, managers are interested in two key outcomes in managing their workforce - **performance and retention**. So given the ambiguity in what is meant by the term engagement, *which models and measures are superior in predicting performance and retention?*

A Performance and Retention Model (from a survey perspective)

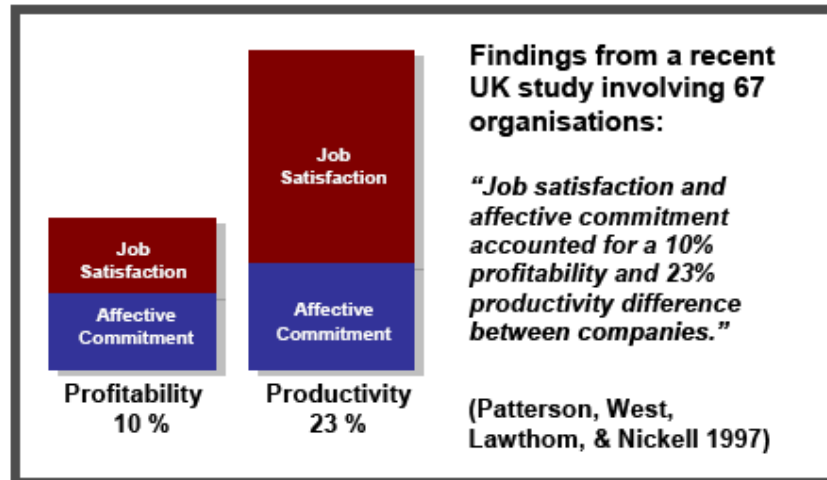


Note: The above model applies to a survey measurement context. There are other factors impacting upon performance, including for example, the cognitive ability of the individual (which can be assessed in part by other means such as psychometric testing), their competencies (both soft skills and technical skills), knowledge and experience, etc., as well as other factors such as technology.

This above performance / retention model is based on a well established empirical connection between these measures and performance and retention. For example, empirical research findings confirm that Affective Commitment (or engagement to the organisation) and Job Satisfaction are 2 key predictors of performance in their own right, **accounting for around 23% variance in productivity** (Patterson, West, Lawthom & Nickell, 1997). It would seem that the positive emotions and better fit associated with this form of commitment and job satisfaction are related to performance effectiveness. These 2 factors also predict Job Commitment / discretionary effort (accounting for 23% of the variance from WRDI® findings), which in turn also predicts performance. Furthermore, these 2 factors are the 2 key predictors of Intention to Stay / Leave (Griffeth, Hom & Gaertner, 2000), accounting for 57% of the variance according to WRDI® findings, emphasising the dual benefit of enhancing employees' commitment / engagement and job satisfaction. Intention to Stay is the main predictor of retention / turnover (Steele & Ovale, 1984).

Job Commitment / discretionary effort is conceptually different from, and only weakly related to, intention to stay ($r = 0.23$) and hence retention. This means that those who are intending to leave are unlikely to slacken off significantly, and conversely, those who are intending to stay, are not necessarily working all that much harder.

In summary, by measuring, diagnosing and enhancing job satisfaction and affective commitment, there is a double pay off with lasting organisational benefits – both enhanced performance and retention!



Key Research Findings

Note: In the above study, the researchers used the term organisational commitment rather than affective commitment, although their organisational commitment items are closely related to affective commitment.

From the previous performance and retention model, the immediate drivers / predictors typically comprise a number of items or questions (ideally a minimum of 4 items which form what is known as a scale), to capture the dimension or construct being measured, to ensure a more robust and more reliable measurement system. They are known as proximal antecedents or more immediate predictors of performance and retention. These factors are lead indicators and continual drivers of an organisation's non-financial performance measures, which in turn drive business results.

The above model also includes distal antecedents or more distant predictors of these key drivers, consisting of:

- job related factors (e.g., job challenge, training);
- workplace related factors (e.g., local management, support, recognition); and
- organisational related factors (e.g., leadership / trust, remuneration).

These distal predictors provide the diagnostic capability of the survey instrument. Statistical analysis and modeling can confirm which practices drive important organisational outcomes (i.e., targeted interventions can be implemented with confidence knowing that the outcomes can be confidently predicted). For example, job satisfaction is more influenced by local or workplace factors, whereas affective commitment is more influenced by organisational factors (e.g., leadership of top management). It's therefore a case of knowing what "levers to pull" to enhance either affective commitment or job satisfaction, which will in turn enhance performance and retention. **In short, it's important to understand the numbers associated with these antecedents.** Such a measurement system



provides an understanding of how investments in HR produce valued outcomes and the opportunity to pro actively influence those HR outcomes.

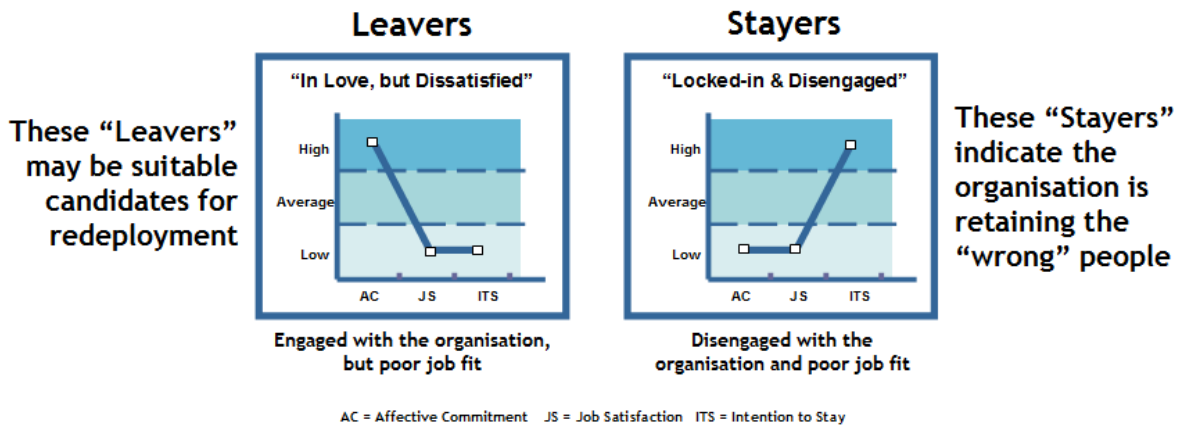
Person – Job and Person – Organisational “Fit”: Career and Organisational Implications

Apart from the performance and retention benefits of enhanced affective commitment and job satisfaction, there are other organisational and individual benefits associated with these measures. Empirical research confirms what is intuitively obvious. An employee who indicates higher levels of job satisfaction and affective commitment is also likely to:

- enjoy a better quality work life (and life in general), which is becoming increasingly more important in the contemporary workplace as workers strive to find more meaning in their work;
- be less stressed (Hart & Wearing, 1995);
- provide higher levels of customer satisfaction (Dahlgard, Kristensen & Kanji, 1998), which is important to customer retention (Reichheld, 1996); and
- be absent less (Makin, Cooper & Cox, 1996).

Note: Job satisfaction is an indicative measure for person – job “fit” and affective commitment is an indicative measure for person – organisational “fit”.

Thus the measures of job satisfaction, affective commitment, and intention to stay, have career management / development implications for employees. **There is a benefit to both the organisation and the employee with a more aligned workforce.** The following examples illustrate the possible combinations of job satisfaction, affective commitment, and intention to stay, including organisational and career implications.





There are Surveys and Surveys!

Now “oils ain’t oils” when it comes to surveys - not all of them are the same. As indicated above, recent innovations in survey design and HR metrics now offer a more scientific approach to proactively addressing engagement and retention risk. Such valid and reliable HR metrics provide management with vital objective, quantitative, and diagnostic information by demographic including workforce segment (e.g., senior management, middle managers, specialists, general or front line employees), concerning workforce engagement / retention risk and alignment issues. These metrics have lifted away the veil of mystique in managing engagement / retention.

Critical questions to ask therefore when evaluating an engagement / retention survey include:

- **Are the measures based on empirical research and do they provide for a comprehensive assessment of performance and retention, as opposed to a piecemeal solution?**
- **Is there psychometric rigour associated with the tool, and what are its psychometric properties** (e.g., reliability, validity, factor structure)?
- **What is the diagnostic capability and predictability of the tool** (or for the more technically minded, what % of variance is accounted for by the distal antecedents in predicting the proximal antecedents of performance and retention – refer previous performance and retention model).

Note: Psychometrics refers to the statistical qualities of a survey’s questions (i.e., items) and scales.

Culture surveys are out and diagnostic engagement (or commitment, job satisfaction and retention) **surveys are in!** There is no one optimum culture for organisations and the link between culture, performance and retention is relatively weak (i.e., diagnostic capability weak). Consequently, the effectiveness of interventions to enhance performance and retention are likely to be problematic.

Furthermore, many organisations expend a significant amount of time and energy on employee surveys that are unsatisfactory and are an exercise in futility. These surveys fail to help organisations because the ingredient that is lacking is a clear understanding of the link between the survey findings and the bottom line business results. In order for a survey to be useful, it needs to generate compelling and actionable insights that directly link to performance and retention. “Growing your own” survey is likely to fall into this category unless the tool has the right measures (based on empirical research), rigorous psychometric properties (valid and reliable), high diagnostic capability, and established norms for meaningful comparisons. **There is little point to collecting data which cannot be interpreted, and from which the success and impact of potential interventions is unknown.**



Engagement Indices: A Popular Marketing Ploy but Psychometrically Flawed?

Some survey providers report an “Engagement Index”. Whilst this concept is intuitively appealing for the unsophisticated (i.e., reduces engagement / retention to a single number), it constitutes a potentially psychometrically flawed approach. An Engagement Index is typically compiled from scales or items, the result of which is an overall index or scale which is not uni-dimensional. For example, it is possible to have various combinations of affective commitment, job satisfaction and intention to stay scores (or the equivalent thereof), comprising the same overall Engagement Index (see above example of Leavers and Stayers), rendering its interpretation and comparisons with other organisations somewhat problematic.

It's like comparing two people, each of whom has say 10 pieces of fruit (i.e., a Fruit Index of 10). One person has 6 bananas, 2 apples and 2 oranges, whilst the other person has 3 bananas, 6 apples and 1 orange. The comparison and interpretation of what 10 pieces of fruit means is unclear. **The interpretation of engagement and retention and associated comparisons, cannot be simply reduced down to and understood in terms of a single number!**

Furthermore, there are other difficulties with this Engagement Index concept. One of the main factors impacting upon an Index score is the composition of the workforce. For example, a workforce of younger age workforce will have a lower Index score than that compared with a more mature aged workforce for two reasons:

- turnover is higher generally for people in their 20's as they typically explore career options, and do not necessarily have the financial responsibilities of mortgages, etc.; and
- these people typically have lower level and less demanding jobs, so their discretionary effort tends to be lower.

Also managers and professionals tend to have higher levels of engagement than their colleagues, and engagement levels tend to decline as service levels increases.

Notwithstanding the above interpretation and comparison issues, from an overall perspective, it would be surprising if Engagement Indices were not linked to firms' profitability and shareholder returns. The elements or measures comprising Engagement Indices include some or all of the key predictors of performance and retention, and empirical research findings confirm the link between these key predictors to the bottom line. There is nothing magical or unique in these findings.

However, of more critical importance is the survey model, the comprehensiveness of its measures, and its psychometric properties, including its diagnostic capability. The effectiveness of interventions (i.e., outcomes of the survey), will be largely dependent upon these properties, and not the Engagement Index *per se*.

Another potential problem with the reporting of Engagement Indices if managers'



KPIs (and in particular a flexible salary component), are linked to such indices, is the potential to corrupt the survey process. Some managers are reported to encourage their staff to complete the survey more favourably than what would otherwise be the case, and in return, managers rate the performance of their people higher. It's a case of mutual back scratching where objectivity and integrity take second place.

Conclusions

It is hoped that the gap will close between the empirical research findings and customs and measurement practices in the HR domain of performance and retention. The tools, methodologies and approaches used in optimizing performance and retention are becoming increasingly more sophisticated and rapidly evolving. **Current best practice may be viewed in a decade as barely scratching the surface.** In a period of ongoing labour shortages, managing and improving the performance of people will demand the same levels of rigour that financial processes do today.

About the Author



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Colin is both a corporate psychologist and an engineer. Prior to his mid-life career change to organisational psychology, he worked as a consultant, senior manager, and professional engineer in the resources sector. Colin's organisational consultancy experience includes assignments in Australia and overseas, both in the private and public sectors. Industries in which he has worked include: agricultural distribution and export, agricultural research, banking and finance, biotechnology research, building and construction, information technology, insurance, health, manufacturing, retail, resources, and tourism.

Colin is one of Australia's leading human capital experts, with a deep and expansive knowledge of the subject, particularly in the areas of engagement, retention and career development, employment strategies and psychological contracts.

The topic of Colin's psychology honours thesis was mid-life career change, and his Master of Business Administration included a dissertation (25,000 word thesis) on psychological contracts and the development of the WRDI®. He has previously been an adjunct lecturer to the Department of Psychology at the University of Queensland and he has also lectured and mentored to 3rd and 4th year psychology students, and supervised a number of conditionally registered psychologists and organisational psychology masters students.

Colin has presented at a number of workshops, seminars and conferences on the above human capital themes.

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- Workforce Analytics;
- Benchmarking / Dashboard Indicators for People Investment \$ Decisions, Continuous Improvement Monitoring, Risk Management;
- Workforce Segmentation and Employment / People Management Strategies;
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- Retention Intervention: A Strategic Approach;

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