

Turnover in State Vocational Rehabilitation: Insights & Trends

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For Today

- Bit of an Introduction
- The Problem
 - Prior Research
- The Current Study & Analysis
- Recommendations (Potential Solutions)

Little Bit About Melanie (Mel) Poe

Melanie Poe

- 3rd year Doc Student
- From Ferndale, WA
- Worked for VR in Washington
- Research interests are advocacy and policy regarding serving transiiton – aged youth.



Little Bit about Dr. Landon



- Studied at Utah State
 - Bachelor
 - Master's
- PhD from Michigan State
- Worked for 7 years as a Rehabilitation Counselor for the State of Idaho - VR System
- Faculty Member at USU since 2016



Background Prior Research

The Problem

- Supply & Demand

- Demand: ~1,500 new state VR counselors needed on an annual basis (O'Brien & Graham, 2009)
- Supply: ~1,100 graduates from Rehab Counseling Programs (Patterson & Paker, 2009)
- Proliferation of Practice Settings
 - 30% or so still seek employment in State VR
 - 70% of graduates are seeking employment elsewhere.

- Turnover & Retention

- Annual Turnover at about 20%
- 50% of new counselors see themselves looking elsewhere in the next five years (Landon et al. 2024)
- State VR is left with more vacancies than applicants.
 - Places a strain on the system and those working in the system.

The Problem with Turnover

- What's the problem with constant personnel turnover?
- Impact on the Agency
 - The state-federal VR system has been dealing with staffing issues for some time (Tansey et al., 2004).
 - Studies have shown that (on average) agencies can plan on a ~30% turnover in staff on an annual basis (Armstrong et al., 2008, Herbert et al., 2021, Pitt et al., 2013, Landon et al., 2024, Sabella et al., 2025).
 - With counselor retirement rates increasing, recurrent concerns related to (1) staff turnover, (2) the financial cost of replacing staff, and (3) fewer RCs pursuing employment in the state-federal VR system, the issue of retention remains salient (Chan, 2003; Chan & Ruedel, 2005).
- Impact on the Client
 - In parallel fields of mental health and substance abuse treatment, staff turnover has:
 - Decreased fidelity to treatment plans (Woltmann et al., 2008);
 - Lowered client satisfaction rates (Plomondon et al., 2007);
 - Lead to poorer client outcomes (Williams & Plotts, 2010); and,
 - Lead to clinical decline in clients (Johnson-Kwochka et al., 2020).

Why are RCs leaving the State VR setting?

- Stress
 - Large Caseloads
 - Role Conflict – not doing the job I envisioned myself doing
 - Paperwork – more of a case manager than a counselor.
- Compensation that lags Credentials/Expertise
 - Younger Workers and those making less than \$40K are mostly likely to leave.
 - Start comparing their current wage against comparable fields and we see occupational drift.
- Limited Advancement, Professional Development, & Supervision
 - Few Promotion Ladders
 - Supervision that is administrative in nature.
 - Limited Professional Development opportunities (lack of newness and challenge)

Research on Turnover in State VR

- 1986 – Crimando et al: Turnover at about 23% annually in rehab facilities.
- 1997 – Barrett et al: “Turnover continues to be a dilemma for rehabilitation agencies” (p. 36).
- 2004 – Layne et al: Occupational Stress affects turnover intentions.
- 2008 – Armstrong et al: Job Satisfaction and its relationship to turnover intent.
- 2013 – Pitt et al: Person – Organization fit. Need for promotion opportunities and better supervision.
- 2021 – Herbert et al: Predictors of Intent to Leave
- 2023 - Herbert et al: Recruitment and Retention...
- 2024 – Landon et al: Professional Identity and its relationship to Turnover
- 2025 – Sabella et al: Impact of Clinical vs Administrative Supervision

Factors Influencing Intent to Stay - Intent to Leave...

- Why might someone want to stay?
 - Higher Salary;
 - Sense that their work is meaningful;
 - Lower caseload size;
 - Advanced work tenure (longevity in current position - close to retirement);
 - Master's Degree (Armstrong et al., 2008; Pitt et al., 2013);
 - Professional Identity (Landon et al., 2024)
 - Clinical Supervision (Sabella et al., 2025)
- Why might someone want to leave?
 - Low pay and high caseloads;
 - Limited options for career advancement;
 - Low job satisfaction - incongruence between personal values and work values;
 - Am I making a difference?
 - Limited work tenure; and,
 - Racial/Ethnic concerns (Armstrong et al., 2008; Pitt et al., 2013).

What We Know From Prior Research

- Layne et al. 2004:
 - American Rehabilitation Counselor Association Membership – 982
 - 174 RCs as the final sample.
 - Organizational Climate shapes rehabilitation counselors' intentions to leave employment with State VR.
 - Disconnected from Leadership – likely to leave.
 - Workload, limited decision-making (autonomy), and lack of supervisory support lead to increase in turnover.
 - Occupational Stress – Affects turnover intentions of RCs.

What We Know From Prior Research

- Armstrong et al. (2008)
 - All CRCs in the Southern Part of the US Invited (3,698) - 1,800 responses returned.
 - Job Satisfaction increases with income level and reduced caseload sizes.
 - Salary does have an impact.
 - Limited potential for advancement.
 - 3 Factors decreased turnover intent: High Salary, Age of Worker, and Having a Master's Degree.
 - 32.8% (n =148) of those surveyed intended to quit in the next two years due to pay.

What We Know From Prior Research

- Pitt et al. (2013)
 - 16% turnover each year in State VR.
 - RCs often leave due to chronic administrative burden, role ambiguity, and limited opportunities for career advancement.
 - Participants expressed frustration with compliance-driven data cultures that overshadowed client-centered service.
 - Many reported that their work environments offered insufficient recognition or reinforcement of effective counseling practices.
 - Stated that turnover should be understood as a predictable outcome of system-level inefficiencies and emotional labor, rather than an individual failure of coping.
 - Less than five years of experience, increase likelihood of leaving.

What We Know From Prior Research

- Herbert et al. (2020)
 - 30% of counselors reported a willingness to leave in the coming year.
 - Counseling Job Satisfaction and Shared Values between the Organization and the Counselor are important.
 - Achievement in the work I do
 - Receive praise and recognition
 - Believe the job to be interesting/varied
 - Have opportunities for promotion
 - Opportunities to learn new skills (professional development)

What We Know From Prior Research

- Landon et al. (2024)
 - Professional Identity – how does this impact Turnover Intent?
 - Caseload Congruence – Ideal vs Real
 - People – Coworkers
 - Pay
 - Promotion
 - Supervision
- Sabella et al. (2025)
 - Further examined the impact of clinical vs administrative supervision on the turnover intent of RCs in state VR settings.

Summary of Prior Research

- Prior Research has helped us understand why they are leaving.
 - Mostly Quantitative Research – Not a problem per se, but doesn't allow for direct interaction with RCs.
 - Pay
 - Caseload Size
 - Perceived values differences between RC and Agency
 - Professional Development Opportunities
 - Become the RC I envisioned for myself during my training program.
 - More focus on counseling skill – less focus on case management and administrative tasks.
- But it is a deficit model – focusing on the problem (turnover).
- No studies have looked solely at Why Rehabilitation Counselors STAY with Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies.

30% of RCs in SVR say they will leave in one year (Herbert et al., 2021)

50% of RCs in SVR say they will look for work elsewhere in the next 5 years (Landon et al., 2024)

Not satisfied with the work they are performing (Herbert et al., 2021)

The Current Project

Rationale

- VR workforce instability, burnout, and turnover remain persistent national concerns within state VR systems.
- Existing research has primarily focused on deficit-oriented models of stress and turnover rather than retention and sustainability.
- This study shifted the focus from *why counselors leave* to *why counselors stay* using a strengths-based Appreciative Inquiry framework.

Why APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY?

- Strengths-based methodology
- Focuses on:
 - what works
 - sustaining conditions
 - organizational strengths
- Shift:
- from deficit → possibility; OR
- what is not working to what is.

Methodology – Why Qualitative?

- Existing literature largely quantitative
- Missing:
 - meaning
 - lived experience
 - counselor voice
- Needed deeper understanding of:
 - identity
 - values
 - workplace experience

Methods & Recruitment

- Qualitative design utilizing Appreciative Inquiry and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- Purposeful sampling was used to recruit “information rich” participants employed in state VR agencies.
- Recruitment occurred through:
 - State VR administrators
 - Professional networks
 - Agency email distribution
- Semi-structured Zoom interviews (The interviews totaled 320 pages of transcripts and 1,050 minutes of recorded data ($m = 45.7$ minutes per interview, range of 23 minutes to 75 minutes)

Inclusion Criteria

- Participants had to:
 1. Be presently working in a state VR agency.
 2. Have at least 3 years of work experience.
 3. Have no current intent to leave their employment with State VR (they are planning on staying).

Sample

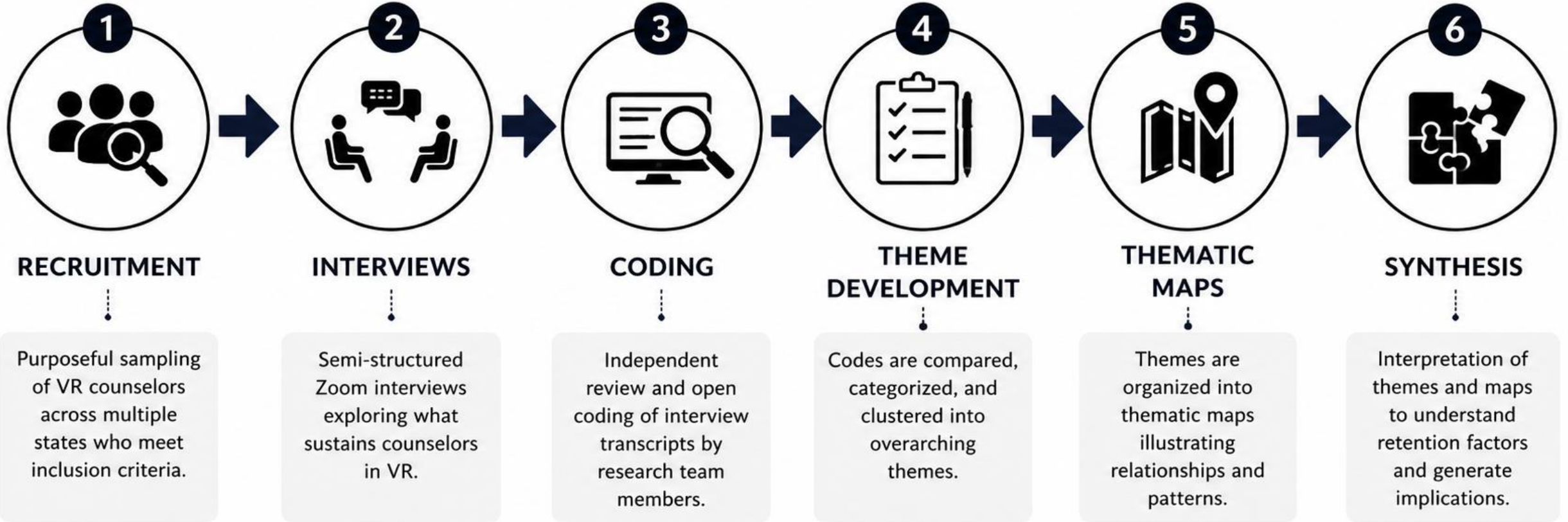
- Final sample: **23 VR counselors**
- Represented:
- **8 U.S. states**
- Diverse tenure levels
- Multiple VR service models

Research Questions

- What factors contribute to RC retention in state VR settings?
- How do RC describe sustaining conditions within the state VR setting?
- How do intrinsic and extrinsic factors interact in retention?

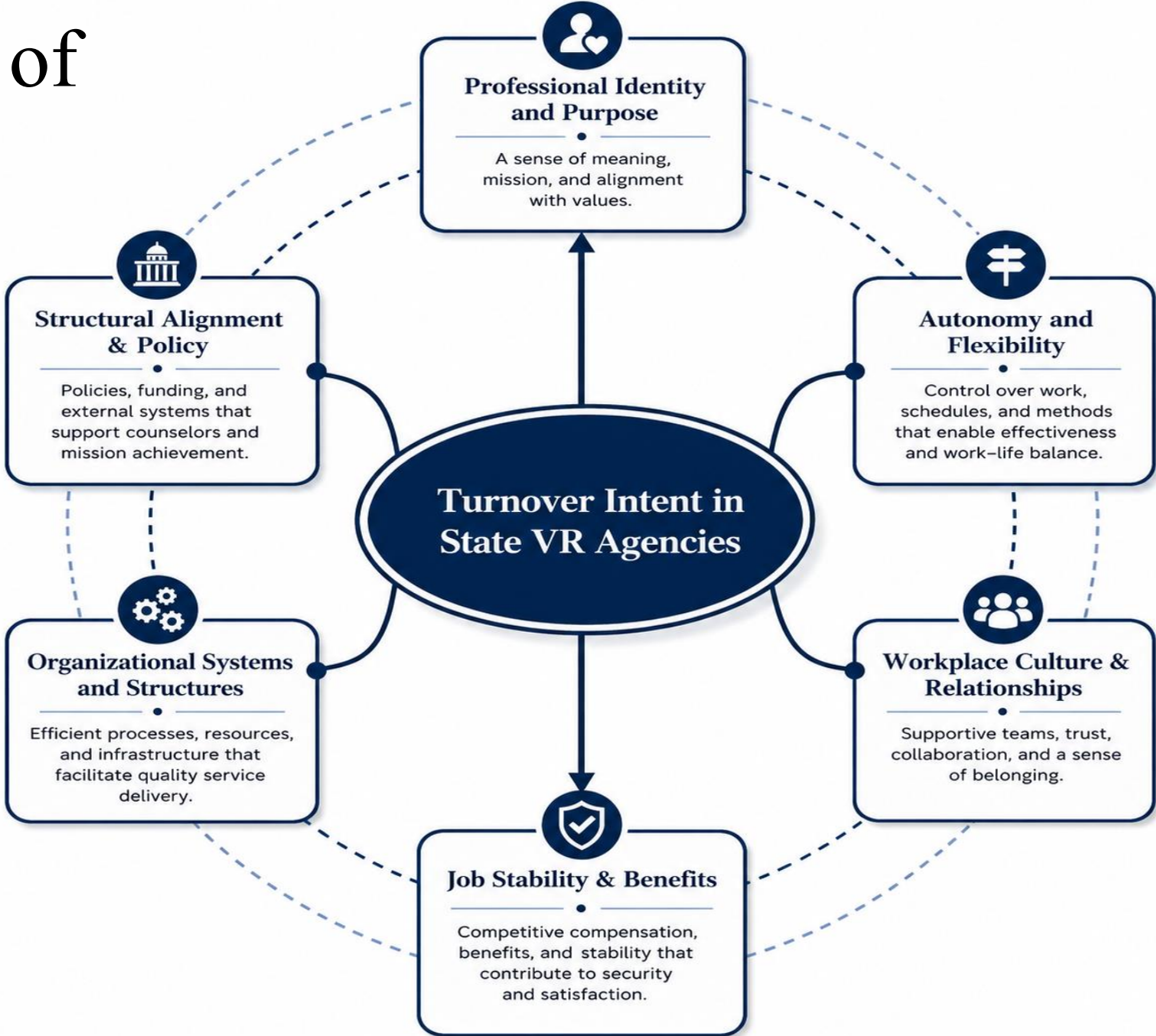
Research Process

A Qualitative Appreciative Inquiry Approach



Rigorous • Collaborative • Strengths-Based • Counselor-Centered

Conceptual Model of VR Counselor Retention



Theme 1: Professional Identity & Purpose

1. Meaningful helping work
2. Counselor identity
3. Advocacy orientation
4. Sense of purpose
5. Alignment with professional values

“This work feels like who I am. Even on hard days, I still believe in what vocational rehabilitation is supposed to do for people.”

Theme 2:

Professional Autonomy & Flexibility

1. Independence in counseling decisions
2. Flexibility in workflow
3. Ability to individualize services
4. Trust from leadership
5. Professional discretion

“When I’m trusted to do my job and use my clinical judgment, I feel invested in staying.”

Theme 3:

Workplace Culture & Relationships

1. Supportive coworkers
2. Team cohesion
3. Supervisory support
4. Psychological safety
5. Shared mission

“Honestly, the people are a huge reason I stay. We support each other through difficult situations.”

Theme 4:

Organizational Systems & Structure

1. Manageable systems
2. Administrative efficiency
3. Communication clarity
4. Consistent expectations
5. Organizational support

“I can handle hard work. What becomes exhausting is when systems make the work harder than it needs to be.”

Theme 5: Job Stability & Benefits

1. Retirement benefits
2. Health insurance
3. Consistent employment
4. Work-life balance
5. Long-term security

“The stability matters. I know what I’m walking into, and that consistency has value.”

Theme 6: Structural Alignment & Policy

1. Policy congruence
2. Alignment between values and systems
3. Ethical practice support
4. Reduced bureaucratic conflict
5. Leadership responsiveness

“I stay when the system allows me to practice in ways that still feel ethical and client-centered.”

Synthesis Across Prior Research and Present Findings

Prior research identified:

- burnout
- bureaucracy
- turnover intent

Present study identified:

- meaning
- identity
- alignment
- autonomy

The Central Tension

- Rehabilitation Counselors stay employed in the State VR setting because:
 - Of who they are (professional identity);
 - What they value (rehabilitation philosophy);
- But...
 - Remain only when the systems supports those values.

Implications

- Support autonomy
- Strengthen workplace culture
- Reduce policy burden
- Improve supervisory support
- Promote professional growth
- Align systems with counselor values

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

From Prior Research and the Present Study We Suggest That...

- Retention is not the absence of burnout, but rather it is the presence of aligned intrinsic motivation and supportive organizational conditions.
- Professional Identity and personal values anchor retention
- But the *System sustains it* (or doesn't)
- Misalignment predicts turnover

Recommendations

- **PRIORITIZE** organizational alignment over individual resilience
 - **REDUCE** administrative burden to preserve counselor identity
 - **STRENGTHEN** autonomy and flexibility
 - **INVEST** in relational workplace culture and supervision
 - **DEVELOP** intentional recruitment pipelines
-
- *VR workforce sustainability efforts should focus not only on recruiting counselors into the profession, but on redesigning organizational systems that allow counselors to remain meaningfully engaged in client-centered work.*

Summary

- Retention is multidimensional
- Intrinsic + extrinsic interaction matters
- Yes things like pay and caseload size matter
- But
 - Positive Work Environment
 - Supervision that enhances professional development
 - Professional Development Opportunities
 - Feeling Valued
- AI provided a strengths-based lens
- Findings support system-level reform



Little
to no
cost.

Questions

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