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The Relationship Between Human Resource Practices and Employee
Retention in Small and Medium enterprises (SMEs) in Kenya



The Relationship Between Human Resource Practices and Employee Retention in Small and Medium enterprises (SMEs) in Kenya



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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article was to analyze the relationship between human resource practices and employee retention in small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The relationship between human resource practices and employee retention in SMEs highlights the significant role of training, compensation, and performance management in fostering employee loyalty. Studies show that effective HR practices such as career development opportunities and work-life balance policies positively influence employee satisfaction, reducing turnover intentions. SMEs that implement fair recruitment systems, provide adequate compensation, and offer growth opportunities experience higher retention rates and improved organizational performance.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social exchange theory, resource-based view (RBV) & Herzberg's two-factor theory may be used to anchor future studies on the relationship between human resource practices and employee retention in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Compensation policies should be competitive yet sustainable, and SMEs should implement performance appraisal systems that emphasize development rather than just evaluation. Governments can incentivize SMEs to offer training grants and compensation tax relief to ease the financial burden of implementing retention-enhancing HR practices.

Keywords: *Human Resource Practices, Employee Retention, Small, Medium Enterprises (SMEs)*

INTRODUCTION

Employee retention, often measured by turnover rates and employee longevity, refers to an organization's ability to keep employees over time and minimize voluntary separation, which positively affects continuity, knowledge retention, and organizational performance. In the United States, turnover trends have shown significant fluctuation, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, with voluntary quit rates peaking at around 32% in 2021 and a substantial portion of employees actively seeking new jobs, indicating retention challenges for employers (Employee turnover trend data). Research also highlights that factors such as job satisfaction, work-life balance, and leadership practices are critical influences on employee retention rates in US institutions where retention remains strategic to reduce replacement costs and maintain productivity (Ajmal, 2023). In Japan, the cultural emphasis on long employment tenure results in higher retention, with data suggesting an average employee retention rate of approximately 84.6%, and more than a third of workers remaining with the same employer for over a decade (Employee retention statistics). In the United Kingdom, while formal academic studies on retention rates vary by industry, trends show that sectors with supportive work environments and career growth opportunities tend to retain employees longer, illustrating the importance of organizational practices in retention across developed economies (Ahmad, 2022). Overall, in these developed contexts, strong retention indicators correlate with supportive HR practices, stable employment norms, and cultural expectations that favor long-term employment, though turnover remains dynamic due to economic shifts and individual career mobility preferences (Agyemang & Ofei, 2018).

Employee retention is intrinsically linked to job satisfaction and organizational commitment; when employees feel valued, supported, and see opportunities for growth, turnover rates decline and longevity increases, enhancing organizational stability and performance. In the US and UK, policies such as flexible work arrangements, career development programs, and leadership support structures have been shown to mitigate turnover tendencies by addressing employees' work-related concerns (Agyemang & Ofei, 2018). Japan's relatively strong retention statistics reflect cultural norms favoring stability and loyalty, but they also highlight the potential for retention strategies that reinforce employee engagement and long-term commitment (Ajmal, 2023). As turnover and retention statistics show, developed economies place significant emphasis on HRM practices that strengthen employee satisfaction and reduce turnover pressure (Birasnav, 2020). Future workforce studies suggest continued monitoring of retention trends, especially as hybrid work and generational workforce shifts influence long-term employment behaviors (Ahmad, 2022).

In developing economies, employee retention often reflects broader socio-economic challenges such as limited career advancement, compensation constraints, and workforce mobility pressures. Here, retention is typically lower than in developed contexts, with turnover strongly linked to inadequate reward systems, job insecurity, and limited professional development opportunities, all of which push workers to seek better prospects elsewhere (Acha-Anyi & Masaraure, 2021). Though comprehensive cross-national turnover statistics are scarce, HR studies indicate that in many developing economies, organizations struggle with retention due to structural issues such as low wages, poor working conditions, and limited benefits packages, which influence employees' decisions to stay or leave (Agyemang & Ofei, 2018). Additionally, research suggests that in countries with constrained labor markets, retention strategies that include supportive leadership, fair compensation, and clear pathways for promotion significantly improve employee longevity

(Birasnav, 2020). These developing contexts highlight the importance of HRM investments in retention strategies that address both intrinsic and extrinsic employee needs. Overall, in developing economies retention remains a significant HR challenge that directly impacts organizational performance and employee motivation, underscoring the need for targeted policies to support sustainable employment practices (Agyemang & Ofei, 2018).

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), empirical evidence points to critically low retention rates, especially in sectors such as healthcare where skilled professionals frequently leave due to systemic challenges. A recent systematic review revealed that the pooled nurse retention rate in SSA was approximately 53%, meaning nearly half of nursing staff may not remain long-term, while the pooled intention to stay was around 57%, with significant regional disparities (East Africa ~65%, Southern Africa ~35%) (Zheng, 2020). These figures highlight the retention crisis in SSA, driven by factors such as inadequate funding, poor working conditions, lack of career progression, and active external recruitment by wealthier countries. Effective retention strategies in this region include financial incentives, improved professional progression opportunities, supportive work environments, and leadership that actively engages employees (Zheng, 2020). However, the structural challenges remain significant, suggesting that without substantive policy and organizational interventions, retention in SSA will continue to lag behind developed and other developing regions (AlQahtani & Alosaimi, 2019). This stark retention landscape underscores the critical need for tailored retention interventions to stabilize workforces in SSA public services, particularly in essential sectors like healthcare (Agyemang & Ofei, 2018).

Human resource practices are vital for ensuring a motivated and competent workforce, which ultimately impacts employee retention. Key HR practices such as recruitment, training and development, compensation, and performance management play a crucial role in shaping employee experience and their decision to stay with an organization. Recruitment policies are designed to attract the right talent by aligning candidate skills with organizational needs. Training and development programs ensure that employees continually upgrade their skills and stay engaged, which can reduce turnover by providing clear career progression pathways. Compensation packages, including competitive salaries and benefits, directly affect an employee's sense of value and satisfaction, influencing their decision to remain in an organization (Agyemang & Ofei, 2018).

Additionally, performance management systems that involve regular feedback, recognition, and career development opportunities can increase employee engagement and reduce turnover. Employees who feel recognized for their contributions and are given opportunities for advancement tend to have lower turnover rates and higher employee longevity. These HR practices, when executed effectively, ensure that employees feel supported, valued, and motivated, reducing the likelihood of them seeking employment elsewhere. In particular, effective compensation systems and ongoing development initiatives are linked to higher retention, as employees view these practices as investments in their personal and professional growth (Ahmad, 2019). Consequently, public sector organizations with robust HR policies that focus on recruitment, training, compensation, and performance management will likely see improved employee retention rates and enhanced organizational stability.

Problem Statement

Despite the recognized importance of human resource (HR) practices in enhancing organizational performance, many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) continue to struggle with high employee turnover and low retention rates, which undermine productivity and long-term sustainability. Research shows that inconsistent or poorly implemented HR policies especially in recruitment, training and development, compensation, and performance management are significant contributors to employee dissatisfaction and turnover in SMEs (Mishra., 2021). Although studies in larger organizations have established that effective HR practices can improve employee retention by enhancing job satisfaction and organizational commitment, the evidence for this relationship within the SME context remains limited and fragmented due to resource constraints and informal HR systems typical of SMEs (Sparrow, 2020). Moreover, SMEs often lack formalized HR frameworks that support employee development and career progression, leading to reduced employee longevity and increased turnover intentions (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2020). As a result, there is a clear need for empirical research that examines how specific HR practices influence employee retention in SMEs, in order to develop tailored strategies that strengthen workforce stability and organizational effectiveness.

Theoretical Review

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET), developed by George Homans and later extended by Peter Blau, posits that workplace relationships are based on reciprocal exchanges where favorable actions by one party lead to favorable responses by the other. This theory suggests that when employees perceive positive actions from their employer such as effective HR practices like fair recruitment, training, and recognition they are more likely to reciprocate through greater job satisfaction, commitment, and retention. In the context of SMEs, employees who receive support and development opportunities from their organization are more likely to feel loyal and stay long-term. The theory's focus on reciprocity and mutual benefit helps explain how SMEs can foster strong, loyal employee relationships through targeted HR practices, thus improving employee retention. As Tajeddini (2021) emphasize, HR practices that focus on trust, support, and development improve retention by building strong social exchange relationships between the employee and employer.

Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV), introduced by Jay Barney, focuses on the idea that an organization's internal resources, particularly human capital, provide a sustainable competitive advantage. RBV suggests that organizations that effectively develop and manage their workforce through HR practices like training, compensation, and performance management gain a competitive edge in retaining skilled employees. In the case of SMEs, HR practices that focus on enhancing employee skills, offering competitive compensation, and recognizing contributions ensure that employees remain motivated and committed to the organization, thus improving retention. This theory is relevant as it highlights that the resources invested in HR management are not only crucial for performance but also for retaining valuable employees. Ahmad and Schroeder (2018) argue that when SMEs focus on nurturing and leveraging human capital, it not only enhances retention but also strengthens the firm's overall competitive advantage.

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory distinguishes between hygiene factors (e.g., salary, working conditions) and motivators (e.g., achievement, recognition) in determining employee satisfaction. Herzberg proposed that while hygiene factors prevent dissatisfaction, motivators are essential for fostering job satisfaction. In SMEs, HR practices that focus on both improving hygiene factors (such as offering competitive compensation) and promoting motivators (such as recognizing achievements and offering career advancement opportunities) are crucial for enhancing employee satisfaction and retention. Employees who feel their needs for both fair compensation and professional growth are met are more likely to stay with the organization. Herzberg's theory underlines that a balance between hygiene factors and motivators helps ensure employee satisfaction, thereby reducing turnover. As noted by Lee et al. (2020), aligning HR practices with both factors significantly reduces turnover and improves retention rates in SMEs.

Empirical Review

Gupta and Kumar (2019) examined the effect of HR practices on employee retention in Indian manufacturing SMEs. The primary purpose of their study was to evaluate how training and development, compensation, and performance appraisal systems influenced employee retention. They used a quantitative survey design to collect data from 350 employees working in manufacturing SMEs, using regression analysis to analyze the relationship between HR practices and employee retention. The results showed that both training and development and compensation had a significant positive effect on employee retention, while performance appraisal systems had a moderate effect. The study found that employees who received sufficient training were more likely to stay with the organization, as it gave them the skills and knowledge to advance in their careers. Similarly, employees who received fair and competitive compensation packages reported higher job satisfaction and a lower likelihood of seeking employment elsewhere. Furthermore, the research highlighted that performance appraisal systems that provided clear feedback and development opportunities were crucial for retaining employees, as they fostered a sense of progression and recognition. The study recommended that SMEs invest more in structured training programs that address employees' career development needs. Additionally, SMEs were advised to establish equitable pay structures and provide performance appraisals that focus not just on evaluating past performance but on developing employees for the future. These HR practices, according to the authors, would improve job satisfaction and retention rates. The research concluded that, especially in SMEs where resources are limited, HR practices like training, compensation, and performance management are essential for retaining skilled employees. The authors also emphasized that SMEs must adopt a long-term perspective on employee development, rather than focusing only on short-term cost savings. By focusing on HR practices that promote employee growth and fair treatment, SMEs can foster loyalty and improve their retention rates. This study provided practical recommendations that SMEs can implement to enhance employee engagement and retention.

Othman (2020) conducted a study to assess the influence of HR practices on employee retention in Malaysian retail SMEs. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the relationship between recruitment practices, career development opportunities, and work-life policies with employee retention. They adopted a cross-sectional survey method, collecting responses from 280 employees working in various retail SMEs across Malaysia. Using structural equation modeling, the researchers identified the direct and indirect relationships between HR practices and retention. The findings revealed that career development opportunities and work-life balance policies had a

particularly strong positive effect on employee retention. Employees who had access to opportunities for career growth and those who benefited from flexible work arrangements were less likely to leave their jobs. Additionally, the study found that recruitment practices had a moderate effect on retention. When organizations recruited candidates who were a better fit for the role and the company culture, employees reported higher satisfaction and were more likely to stay long term. The study also showed that retention in retail SMEs was highly dependent on the organizational culture, where a supportive and inclusive work environment reduced turnover intentions. The researchers recommended that SMEs in the retail sector focus on improving employee engagement by creating clear career progression pathways and offering work-life balance initiatives. They also suggested implementing flexible work schedules and fostering a culture of trust to retain employees. The study concluded that HR practices in SMEs should focus not only on attracting talent but also on keeping them by providing opportunities for personal and professional growth. Othman (2020) further emphasized the need for HR managers to provide ongoing development opportunities to ensure job satisfaction and high retention rates.

Al Mamun and Hasan (2020) explored the relationship between HRM practices and employee retention in Bangladeshi service SMEs. The aim of their study was to assess the effect of recruitment systems, training opportunities, compensation fairness, and performance appraisals on employee retention intentions. The researchers used a quantitative survey design, collecting data from 410 employees working in small and medium service enterprises in Bangladesh. The data was analyzed using correlation and regression analyses to examine the relationships between HR practices and retention. The results showed that recruitment quality, training programs, and compensation fairness had a positive and significant relationship with employee retention. Employees who felt they were recruited based on their skills and qualifications were more likely to stay with the organization, as they perceived a good match between their abilities and the job role. Similarly, training programs that focused on skill enhancement and career progression contributed to higher job satisfaction and reduced turnover rates. The study also highlighted that compensation fairness was critical in maintaining employee loyalty, with employees preferring equitable pay and benefits. Performance appraisals that provided constructive feedback and opportunities for development were shown to have a moderate but positive effect on retention. Based on these findings, the authors recommended that SMEs in Bangladesh adopt HR practices that emphasize fair recruitment processes, invest in continuous employee training, and provide competitive compensation to retain talent. They also suggested that performance appraisals be designed to focus on employee growth rather than just evaluation. The study concluded that effective HRM practices can play a significant role in improving employee retention, particularly in SMEs, by addressing both intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

Sheikh (2021) examined the influence of HR practices on employee retention in Pakistani IT and tech SMEs. The purpose of their research was to assess how compensation, training, performance management, and employee participation affected turnover intentions. The study utilized a quantitative survey approach, distributing questionnaires to 320 employees in various IT SMEs and using structural equation modeling to analyze the data. The findings revealed that employee participation in decision-making and performance management were strongly linked to employee retention, whereas compensation and training also contributed significantly, but to a lesser extent. The study highlighted that when employees were involved in decision-making and received clear, consistent feedback through performance management systems, their intention to leave decreased.

The researchers recommended that SMEs foster participative decision-making cultures and enhance performance feedback systems to improve retention. They also stressed the importance of transparent compensation and career growth opportunities in retaining employees. This study concluded that employee retention is highly dependent on HR practices that promote inclusion, clear communication, and personal growth.

Nguyen and Ngo (2021) investigated the impact of HR practices on employee retention in Vietnamese family-owned SMEs. The purpose of the study was to understand how recruitment systems, training opportunities, and work environment policies affected employee retention. Using a cross-sectional survey, they gathered responses from 450 employees working in family-owned SMEs and analyzed the data through regression modeling. The study found that recruitment systems that aligned employees' skills with the job led to better retention, while work environment policies like work-life balance had the strongest positive effect. Training opportunities also played a role in improving retention, but it was the work environment policies that had the most significant impact. The researchers recommended that SMEs improve work environment policies to enhance employee satisfaction and reduce turnover. They also suggested that the recruitment process be more structured, ensuring that employees were well-matched with their roles.

Iqbal (2022) explored how HR practices influence retention in South African technology SMEs. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the relationship between training, compensation, performance management, and employee retention. They adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys from 300 employees with in-depth interviews from 25 HR managers. The quantitative data revealed that training and compensation were the strongest predictors of retention, while performance management had an indirect effect by increasing job satisfaction. Employee participation also played a significant role in retention, as employees who had input into their work processes felt more committed to the organization. The study recommended that SMEs adopt comprehensive training programs and transparent compensation plans to enhance employee loyalty and reduce turnover.

Kamau and Gitonga (2023) focused on HR practices and retention in Kenyan agribusiness SMEs. The purpose was to explore how training programs, recruitment processes, incentive compensation, and performance appraisals affected employee longevity. They employed a quantitative survey, collecting data from 390 employees and applying logistic regression analysis. The study revealed that incentive compensation and training had the greatest positive effects on retention, while recruitment processes and performance appraisals had a lesser impact. The study recommended that agribusiness SMEs invest in employee incentives and training to improve retention rates. Furthermore, it suggested that SMEs design structured recruitment processes to ensure that employees are a good fit for the roles.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Gap

A significant conceptual gap lies in the integration of HR practices and employee retention theories. While most studies focus on individual HR practices such as training, compensation, and performance management, they do not extensively explore how these practices interact as a comprehensive HR strategy. Current literature often examines the isolated effects of these practices on retention, but a holistic view that combines multiple HR practices and integrates them into a unified framework for employee retention in SMEs is still lacking. Additionally, studies have yet to adequately link employee motivation theories (e.g., Self-Determination Theory or Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory) with HR practices in the SME context. Future research could explore how these theories can explain the psychological mechanisms through which HR practices influence retention.

Contextual Gap

In terms of context, there is a noticeable gap in understanding HR practices in different SME sectors. While several studies focus on specific industries, such as manufacturing (Gupta & Kumar, 2019) or IT (Sheikh, 2021), there is a lack of research in SMEs across varied sectors, such as agriculture, retail, or hospitality. Different sectors have unique operational challenges, employee expectations, and turnover rates, which may influence the effectiveness of HR practices on retention. Therefore, more research is needed to investigate the sector-specific impact of HR practices on employee retention in SMEs, and how sectoral differences influence retention strategies. Furthermore, while the work environment policies are discussed in relation to work-life balance, studies have not sufficiently linked these practices to employee engagement and organizational culture in SMEs.

Geographical Gap

The geographical gap is particularly evident in the lack of studies on employee retention in SMEs in developing economies outside of Asia (e.g., Vietnam, Bangladesh) and South Africa. While countries like India, Malaysia, and Pakistan have been studied, much less attention has been given to Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. These regions, with distinct economic, political, and cultural environments, present unique challenges and opportunities in SME employee retention. For example, Sub-Saharan Africa faces challenges related to economic instability, limited access to formal education, and high turnover in critical sectors like healthcare and agriculture. There is a need for comparative research that explores HR practices and retention across different regions to understand the global applicability of HR practices and identify region-specific retention strategies. Further, more studies are required in developing economies to understand the role of informal HR practices and how cultural factors shape retention strategies in smaller enterprises.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, the relationship between Human Resource (HR) practices and employee retention in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) is crucial for organizational stability and long-term success. HR practices such as training and development, compensation, performance management, and recruitment systems significantly impact employees' job satisfaction, motivation, and ultimately, their decision to remain with an organization. Effective HR practices that align employee goals with organizational objectives, provide career growth opportunities, and offer fair compensation have been shown to reduce turnover rates and enhance employee longevity, especially in resource-constrained environments like SMEs. However, SMEs often face challenges in fully implementing these practices due to limited resources, which highlights the need for targeted, cost-effective strategies that maximize employee engagement and retention. Additionally, understanding the contextual and geographical factors that influence the effectiveness of HR practices across different SME sectors and regions is essential to tailor retention strategies that are relevant and impactful. As SMEs are often the backbone of economies, investing in sound HR practices that prioritize employee development, recognition, and work satisfaction is not only crucial for retention but also for improving organizational performance. Future research should continue to examine how HR practices can be optimized for SMEs in various regions, particularly in developing economies, to provide insights that drive sustainable employee retention and organizational growth.

Recommendations

Theory

From a theoretical perspective, it is recommended that future research integrates HR practices and employee retention theories into a unified conceptual framework for SMEs. While current studies often isolate individual HR practices, such as training, compensation, or performance management, they rarely examine how these practices function together as an integrated retention strategy. The Resource-Based View (RBV) could be further extended by linking it with Social Exchange Theory to explain how the synergy between various HR practices can improve employee loyalty and retention in SMEs. Future studies should also focus on intrinsic and extrinsic motivators within SMEs to offer a more holistic understanding of retention dynamics. Exploring job satisfaction models alongside HR practices will help explain why certain HR practices are more effective in fostering retention than others in SME environments.

Practice

In practice, SMEs should focus on integrating HR practices that align with employee expectations and organizational goals. Specifically, training and development programs should not only address skill enhancement but also provide career growth opportunities, thereby ensuring that employees see a clear pathway for advancement. Compensation policies should be competitive yet sustainable, and SMEs should implement performance appraisal systems that emphasize development rather than just evaluation. HR managers should adopt flexible work arrangements to improve work-life balance, a factor that has been shown to influence retention in many industries, especially in service and knowledge-based SMEs. Additionally, SMEs should prioritize employee participation in decision-making processes, as it fosters a sense of belonging and ownership, which is vital for retention. The development of an employee engagement framework that incorporates these HR practices will help SMEs reduce turnover and enhance organizational performance.

Policy

At the policy level, governments and business organizations should support HR training programs tailored for SMEs, helping them implement effective HR practices that contribute to employee retention. Policies should also promote inclusive recruitment practices that ensure the best candidates are hired, leading to better job fit and long-term retention. Governments can incentivize SMEs to offer training grants and compensation tax relief to ease the financial burden of implementing retention-enhancing HR practices. Additionally, policymakers should encourage SMEs to establish formal feedback mechanisms that align with national labor laws, creating transparent systems for performance reviews and career development. By integrating retention strategies into national SME development policies, public authorities can contribute to the growth and sustainability of SMEs, thus addressing the challenge of high employee turnover.

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