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## Employee Retention Strategies in the US Hotel Industry

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# EMPLOYEE RETENTION STRATEGIES IN THE US HOTEL INDUSTRY

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### **Abstract**

The hospitality industry has been dealing with the issue of unusually high turnover rates for years. Not only is employee turnover a large drain on company resources, it also has the ability to negatively impact businesses due to a decrease in customer service quality. For this reason, industry professionals and academics have sought to identify and implement strategies that aim to decrease turnover and increase employee retention. Focusing on the US Hotel Industry, this paper uses secondary research to identify and analyze the most commonly used strategies by categorizing them into six human resource practices. The purpose of this research is to analyze these strategies in such a way that will be useful to industry professionals who wish to lower their retention rates and academics as a basis for future research on the effectiveness of these methods.

## **Introduction**

Employee turnover remains a severe problem for the hospitality industry. Employee turnover rates within the hotel industry, specifically, in the United States averages 87.4% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). When an employee separates from a firm, management is forced to use company resources to re-hire and train that position. The hospitality industry depends heavily on human capital because of the unique level of customer-employee interaction that it requires (Rehman & Mubashar, 2017). For this reason, it is important to the success of any hospitality firm to encourage long-term employment and defend against low retention rates. In an attempt to do just this, researchers and industry professionals have operationalized certain human resource procedures with the goal to reduce employee turnover. Employing a secondary research approach, the following paper reviews current literature referring to the methods that hotels in the United States use to curb employee turnover, analyzes the effects of these procedures on retention rates, and draws conclusions about which methods seem to be the most effective.

## **Literature Review**

Employee turnover is a multi-faceted problem that affects organizations across many industries. The hospitality industry faces a unique problem because its turnover rate is nearly twice that of other industries. Consequently, current literature discusses the many causes of turnover, in addition to the costs associated with losing employees. Further research found that many organizations are attempting to curb these high rates with human resource strategies aimed at reducing turnover and improving employee relations.

## **Causes**

There is a large amount of data present within current literature naming and supporting various determinants of turnover intentions. Steed (2004) postulated that research surrounding this topic has focused mostly on finding the causes, rather than the direct cost, of turnover due to the wide variability of cost associated with it. The causes of employee turnover, for the purpose of this study, were designated into three categories: job dissatisfaction, recruitment, selection, and training, and compensation.

### *Job Dissatisfaction*

Most of the current literature identifies job dissatisfaction as at least a partial reason why an employee would choose to leave their organization. Congruent with these findings, Albattat and Som (2013) found that job dissatisfaction was the first, and most influential, determinant of an employee's decision to leave a firm. Job dissatisfaction is defined as an ultimate feeling of unhappy or negative feelings about one's job due to several defining factors including, but not limited to, work environment, growth and development opportunities, and autonomy (Jodlbauer, Selenko, Batinic, & Stiglbauer, 2011).

#### *Work Environment.*

The perceived state of an employee's work environment is determined by the relationships between co-workers and supervisors, as well as the employee's overall fit into the organizational culture. Rehman and Mushabar (2017) found that less than favorable work environments can lead to increased job stress which can then lead to turnover intention.

Co-worker relations are complex in the way that they contribute to turnover intentions. Tews, Michel, and Ellingson (2013) describes co-worker relations in terms of emotional and

instrumental support. Their findings suggest that emotional support from coworkers increased job satisfaction and therefore had a negative relationship with employee turnover. According to the study, this fact is especially true for industries with high customer contact such as the hospitality and tourism industries. In stark contrast, their study found that coworker instrumental support was positively related to turnover, possibly because of the negative perception that *unsolicited* help can create in the mind of the employee receiving it (Tews, Michel, & Ellingson, 2013). However in their similar study, Xu et al. (2018) found that coworker emotional support only helped to negate effects from abusive supervision, having little influence over actual turnover intentions.

Supervisory relations are described in terms of support and abuse, where support promotes job satisfaction and abuse results in job dissatisfaction. Xu et. al (2018) found that employees who perceived to have experienced high levels of abusive supervision are more likely to leave their position than those who have not. They hypothesized that mistreatment from supervisors creates a feeling that the organization does not care about their well-being. Where abuse from supervisors causes an increase in turnover intentions, studies have also found that supervisory support can lead to a decrease in turnover intentions. For example, Kang, Gatling, and Kim (2015) found that perceived supervisory support positively affected organizational commitment and job satisfaction. However, their study also suggested that, though supervisory support positively affected job satisfaction and therefore decreased turnover intentions, it did not affect career satisfaction. This indicates that, though a person may be satisfied with their organization, they may still intend to leave the industry for other reasons. Despite this

information, Kang, Gatling, and Kim (2015) concluded that managers and supervisors who exercise supportive behaviors regularly will lessen their employees' turnover intentions.

Poor communication between management and staff was found as a main cause of job dissatisfaction (Bidois, 2008), while clear communication fosters trust and loyalty leading to increased job security. Job security, according to Ahunakin et al. (2019), is a highly influential factor in choosing to stay with an organization and has found to be positively related to increased job performance and job satisfaction.

It is important to note that an employee's judgement of their work environment and inter-work relationships are their personal perceptions. DiPietro and Condly (2007) emphasized that regardless of accuracy, an employee who perceives that their work environment is unfair or inappropriate is likely to leave an organization. They argued that it is the manager's responsibility to address the points of concern if they are present or communicate with employees and bridge the gap between perception and reality.

#### *Growth and Development Opportunities.*

Research on the topic of employee retention emphasizes the importance of employee growth and development initiatives. When a job ceases to be challenging an employee, they may become dissatisfied and look for other opportunities. In fact, Katz (2019) found that lack of career growth opportunities is another influential reason behind an employee leaving their current job. Swisher (2016) opined that on-the-job-development and growth opportunities are critical to employee engagement which is key to organizational success.



Development refers to the development of psychological capital. Psychological capital includes the knowledge and skills that are necessary to perform a task or duty. According to DiPietro and Condly (2007), some employers are hesitant to provide employees with too much growth and development because it creates more of a loss when the employee separates from the organization. Though it seems counter intuitive, this school of thought aligns with Rehman and Mushabar's (2017) study which found a significant positive relationship between psychological capital and turnover intentions. This relationship is likely due to the ability of the employee to then use their new found skills to acquire a job that better meets their needs. However, such as stated by Meliou and Maroudas (2011), continuous growth opportunities benefit the entire industry as increased knowledge bases create a more competent industry.

#### *Autonomy.*

It is common knowledge within the current hospitality industry that micro-management decreases productivity. Employees with greater autonomy show stronger organizational commitment and therefore are less likely to separate from their position (DiPietro & Condly, 2007). Autonomy breeds internal motivation which DiPietro and Condly (2007) found will lead to a decrease in turnover intentions. They argued that, although motivation comes from within the individual, supervisors can play a role in maximizing this trait by creating a positive and supportive work environment that is challenging and rewarding. However, Ricci and Milman (2003) found in their study that the level of challenge a job exhibited was not highly influential in determining turnover intentions. Variances of these factors influence likely have to do with levels of employment and demographic characteristics of the samples.

#### ***Recruitment, Selection, and Training***

It is clear through research that a large determinant of employee turnover is poor hiring practices and employee misplacement. According to Bonn and Forbringer (1992) and Yetzer (2001), due to a widespread labor shortage, hotel managers struggle to find people to fill positions causing them to have no choice but to hire people even when they are not a fit for the job. Consequently, the ill fit employee will most likely contribute to the turnover rate when they are forced to eventually leave the position. However, even when there are many applicants, inadequate hiring procedures can fail to identify the best fit for a job (Nasurdin, Ahmad, & Ling, 2015).

Once hired, it is important to properly train employees and give them the essential resources to perform. Ohunakin et al. (2019) found that training has a direct, positive relationship to job performance and commitment. Proper training of well-matched individuals should then decrease employee turnover intentions.

### *Compensation*

Some research has found that compensation levels, as long as they are fair and aligned with industry standards, have little to no influence on job commitment (Bidois, 2008; Ricci & Milman, 2003). However, Santhanam, Kamalanabhan, & Dyaram (2014) concluded that compensation is a significant factor in determining future turnover intentions. The differences in these findings could be due to demographic differences in research samples. For example, Weis and Rosendale (2019) found that younger employees who work out of financial necessity are

more inclined to stay with an organization as long as their needs are being met. Whereas older employees with more education would be more likely to leave if they felt that their pay was not representative of their value to the organization.

In addition, considering the widespread labor shortage, compensation and benefits become a mode of influence when enticing employees to work for a certain company. Though it may not be a reason to leave an organization, better pay and benefit packages may influence employees to gravitate towards a certain company giving them the competitive advantage and a larger labor pool (Weis & Rosendale, 2019).

## **Cost**

The literature that does discuss the effects of turnover highlights the financial costs of employee turnover along with the detraction from service standards. Lashley (2001) categorizes the losses felt by organizations as a result of employee turnover into four distinct areas. Three of the four areas consider *direct* costs, these include: leaving costs, replacement costs, and transition costs. The last area considers *indirect* costs.

### ***Direct***

Direct costs associated with employee turnover include the financial cost of losing, hiring, and training a new employee. Hinkin & Tracey (2000) found that the direct cost of each employee lost and replaced is between \$1,500 to \$6,000 with variances occurring between level of employee and geographic location. Of the losses that Lashley (2001) discusses in his research, three of the four constitute direct costs of turnover and are considered the easiest to measure. Leaving costs refer to payroll and any other payment due to the separated employee.

Replacement costs are defined as any cost associated with recruiting and selecting a new employee, including the costs of interviewing. Lastly, transition costs are any costs related to the training of a newly hired employee. Though direct costs are the most concrete and easy to measure and obtain, studies show that they account for less than half of the total costs associated with turnover (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000).

### ***Indirect***

Though more difficult to measure, indirect costs account for more than half of the costs related to turnover (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000). Lashley (2001) states in his article that indirect costs associated with employee turnover have to do with the loss of customer service quality, customer loyalty, and productivity. Supporting this statement, Albattat and Som (2013) found in their research that high rates of turnover have a direct negative relationship with customer service quality. Decreases in customer service quality can lead to losses of repeat business and poor brand recognition which can cause lasting damage to a company's reputation. In addition, employee turnover increases job stress on other employees who may have to work harder due to the reduction of staff (Adams, 2001). These types of losses do not have an exact monetary value, however they do make an impact on an organizations competitive advantage.

### **Strategies**

Various studies examine ways to reduce turnover through selective hiring, training with intention, and increasing overall job satisfaction. Due to the subjective nature of these strategies and the people they are being used on, it is difficult to determine effectiveness and measure success (Ohunakin, et. al., 2019). For this reason, literature on effective HR strategies aimed at reducing turnover are few and far between.

In their study, Santhanam, Kamalanabhan, & Dyaram (2014) examined the relationship between human resource practices (recruitment, selection, training, career growth opportunities, performance appraisal, and compensation) and turnover intentions. Their research asserted that, though not all human resource practices have a direct relationship to turnover intentions, employers should be aware of the possible effects of each and how they develop into determinants for separation. Therefore, each practice provides employers with an opportunity to reduce turnover through initiatives specific to that level of employment.

### **Methodology**

This research seeks to identify and organize human resource strategies that are used to reduce employee turnover in the hotel industry. In order to accomplish this goal, secondary qualitative research through online databases was used to locate studies relating to employee turnover strategies in the hotel industry. Key words were used as search guidelines, such as: employee turnover, hospitality industry, hotel employee retention, selective hiring, and employee retention in the hotel industry. In order to narrow the scope of this study to align with given limitations, research only included studies within the hotel industry of the United States.

Using the human resource practices defined by Santhanam, Kamalanabhan, and Dyaram (2014) as categories, each retention strategy identified in the literature was placed into one of six different types of practice. Once organized by HR practice, each strategy was analyzed focusing specifically on effectiveness, frequency, and future implications. Gaps in research were then identified through quantitative analysis. Finally, conclusions were drawn regarding the most effective and widely used employee retention strategies. Future research directions are offered along with implications of the study.

### **Analysis**

The hospitality industry is unique in that it is customer-service focused. This means that employees who work in the hospitality industry must not only be able to perform the tasks required, but also perform those tasks in a way that is hospitable and friendly. Successful employee retention requires an understanding of what employees are looking for in a job and what the job is looking for in an employee. Considering the current research, the most important aspect in regard to retaining quality employees is to have solid procedures in place at every level of employment that have been designed specifically to increase retention at their specific location.

### **Recruitment**

In the midst of a labor shortage, finding potential employees has become increasingly difficult. Hotel managers around the United States must be creative when considering recruitment strategies. This research indicates that the most commonly used recruitment strategy used by US hotel companies are referral programs. Karen Welzel, corporate HR Director at Classic Hospitality argues that referral programs are effective at finding quality employees because the employees referring the candidate already knows what is required to be successful (Poe, 2003). In fact, according to Simon (2003) management at Red Roof Inn insists that referral programs are among the most successful means to attract suitable employees to the organization. These referral programs encourage current employees to recruit potential employees to the company. If the referred employee is successful, usually past a certain period of time, the referring employee would receive a bonus. For example, Wyndam's executive team developed a referral program known as Finder's Keeper's that rewards current employees with a \$1,500

bonuses if their referral makes it past 90 days (Wolff, 2001). Referral programs save time and resources during the recruitment process because the referring employees doing the leg work. Additionally, referred employees will likely have a clear understanding of job requirements and expectations.

Success has also been found using community outreach programs and alternative advertising. The hotel industry relies heavily upon a younger workforce and those who speak English as a second language. Poe (2003) collected opinions from industry professionals who have stated that alternative advertising, such as on buses and train stations, in low income areas can widen the hiring pool and increases diversity in the workplace. In addition, community outreach programs, such as those used by Davidson Hotel Co. Welfare to Work, focus on recruiting potential employees who live in underdeveloped neighborhoods and may be struggling to find a job (Simon, 2003). Recently, many hotel companies around the United States are now partnering with schools and universities to develop internship and training programs to entice the younger population to work for their company. Alternative advertising and community outreach programs are effective at improving recruitment efforts because it reaches the side of the labor pool that is often neglected.

### **Selection**

This research indicated that improved selection strategies are the most influential when attempting to reduce turnover. Interviews conducted by Wolff (2001) gathered that the most important aspect of retaining employees is choosing the right employees for the job in the first place. Thorough interview processes are essential when determining if a potential employee is a good fit for the organization. Many hotels, such as the Red Roof Inn, have increased the number

of interviews conducted during the hiring process in order to better assess the applicants fit for the organization (Simon, 2003). In addition to thorough interviewing, the applicants are able to “interview” the company through tours and meet and greets with current employees. In addition to increased number of interviews, Wolff (2001) concluded through various interviews with industry professionals that there has been success in using more than one interviewer when hiring creating a more well-rounded idea of who the individual is and how they will fit into the corporate culture. Reid has developed a hiring process known the Reid System which has had much success in lowering turnover rates among US hotels. The Reid System is a customizable hiring system that is tailored to each industry and company (Yetzer, 2001). This system includes an application, interview questions, employee assessments, custom forms, and background checks. By using this process consistently, employers are able to streamline hiring and reduce strain on resources. Because the process has been standardized, results from suitable applicants are more accurate and have shown to result in lower rates of turnover.

During the interview process, employees should be given a good idea of what the job entails and what is required. Managers of many hotels have recently begun running “test drives” where the potential employee will shadow a current employed member of staff so they know exactly what to expect from the position (Wolff, 2001). Yetzer (2001) states that it is imperative to fully screen employees with reference to the specific job they will be performing, such as customer service skills in the hospitality industry. Industry professionals have noted that the qualities needed to be successful in the hotel industry are a willingness to learn, a hospitable attitude, and then experience in hospitality.



## **Training**

In order for employees to perform well, they must be properly trained. Employees who do not have adequate training are much more likely to leave an organization. Training strategies aimed at reducing turnover should be concrete, consistent, and continuous. According to Ricci and Milman (2003), industry professionals have found success in designing standard operating procedures that are clear and concise and following them exactly. Having these policies in place reduces confusion and uncertainty in the workplace that can lead to job dissatisfaction.

Continuous training is equally important when considering employees job satisfaction and therefore turnover intentions. For this reason, hotel managers have increased their focus on continuous training and job flexibility. Allowing employees to train in other departments, such as Charleston Place's *Trading Places* (Poe, 2003) has had success in promoting retention because the employee, and the company, can find the department that is most suitable. Many hotel employees leave the company because they do not fit in their current position, however there are many different departments within a hotel. These types of strategies can help to reduce turnover by allowing the employee to find what works for them within the company rather than leaving the company altogether.

## **Career Growth Opportunities**

Research found that career growth opportunities are among the most important factors when an employee is deciding whether to remain with an organization. People want to be in jobs that allow them room for growth and development. Hotels that encourage skill development and provide opportunities for growth see higher organizational commitment. According to Poe

(2003), Four Seasons has enjoyed one of the lowest turnover rates among US hotel companies due to their commitment to promoting within.

### **Performance Appraisal**

Performance appraisal strategies come in various forms. However, all have the same intention: to recognize and appreciate employees. Employees who feel appreciated are more likely to remain with that organization than those who do not. Programs that encourage quality performance, such as Woolverton Inn's Room Check program, motivate employees by compensating them with bonuses when requirements are met (Poe, 2003). Employees are then motivated to do their jobs well and also feel like they are important to the organization. The WOW! Program practiced at Charleston Place encourages employees to recognize each other's good work so that the rest of the company can recognize this as well (Poe, 2003). They have seen a reduction in turnover rates since the implementation of this program likely due to increased job satisfaction. Poe (2003) also gathered that many industry professionals have begun to distribute bonuses when organizational goals are met, keeping employees excited and motivated to provide excellent service while also satisfying their recognition needs.

When employees are recognized for their work, it promotes healthy and loyal relationships that help to decrease overall turnover intentions. Thank you notes, bonuses, cookouts, employee appreciation weeks, and spot awards are all examples of ways that a company can recognize good performance (Simon, 2003). Some hotels even host parties to celebrate their employees. Employee parties and celebrations bolster positive relations between employees and the company (Poe, 2003; Simon, 2003). Woolverton Inn has seen no turnover in

the past twelve months which they have attributed to their numerous retention strategies, including employee “fun” days.

Manager should have programs in place to ensure that their employees are being properly appreciated. Hostmark developed a program named Gung Ho! which highlights the idea that every employee is just as important as another, ensures that employees have the skills and resources necessary to do their jobs, and finally puts measures in place to recognize and reward employees (Wolff, 2001). Results show that this program, and others of the same type, are highly effective at boosting employee retention.

### **Compensation**

In today’s labor market, employees expect to be compensated fairly for the job they are doing (Ricci & Milman, 2003). Therefore, in order to remain appealing to the labor pool, companies must offer more in terms of compensation to attract and retain quality employees. According to research conducted by Ricci and Milman (2003), employers are using higher wages, benefits packages, paid vacation time, tuition reimbursement, health and dental insurance, and frequent bonuses to persuade employees to choose and remain with the organization. Alternative compensation options are a point of competitive advantage for hotel companies who are competing for the same labor pool. Those companies with more appealing offerings realize lower turnover rates than others.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Future Research**

This research should be used as guide for hoteliers and hotel managers when faced with an employee turnover problem. Due to the negative effects of turnover on individual hotels and

the hospitality industry as a whole, these strategies are important to understand and put into practice. By breaking each strategy down into each human resource practice, employers should be able to find specific solutions for the areas where they are having the most difficulty.

Limitations of this study, first and foremost, was the time given to complete it. In only eight weeks, it is difficult to fully research all possible employee retention strategies that are being used by US hotels. For this reason, this research focuses on the most common strategies that are currently being used to reduce turnover. Additionally, since this is a qualitative study, the results are subjective. What works for one hotel may not work at all for another. It is important for managers to understand that this research is not a step by step guide to reducing turnover. Instead, it hopes to draw attention to the common causes of turnover and how to reduce their effects. Each program implemented by a hotel should be tailored to their individual needs in order to be most effective.

Future research should be directed at quantitatively measuring the effectiveness of each retention strategy. Problems with this type of research is generalizability, as stated above. Each hotel is different and therefore has a completely different staff. However, a quantitative study could help to narrow down the most commonly effective strategies and the ability to build on those.

### **Conclusion**

Employee turnover creates many problems for hotel managers in the United States. In addition to being a large drain on resources, turnover reduces overall service quality and productivity. There are many different causes of employee turnover ranging from job dissatisfaction, poor selection and hiring practices, incomplete training, and compensation levels.

This study aimed to identify the most effective strategies currently used by US hotels to reduce turnover intentions in their employees. The research found that there is not a one-size-fits-all answer to the problem of turnover. However, there are practices that can be put into place to help increase retention and cut losses caused by turnover. By using the six human resources practices as a guideline, each strategy was analyzed and placed into each of the six categories. Findings show that the most important step in reducing turnover is proper employee selection. This is followed by performance appraisal and compensation. The results of this study show that there are many ways that a hotel can reduce turnover and should be used accordingly.

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