

Rewarded and Retained: The Secret Behind Engineer Loyalty in Sulaymaniyah

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between reward management and employee retention among professional engineers in the construction industry in Sulaymaniyah. Specifically, the study aims to assess the level of reward management practices and the level of employee retention among professional engineers working in selected construction companies. A simple random sampling technique was employed, and data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The responses were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation to determine the strength and significance of the relationship between the variables. The data will be obtained from 114 professional engineers across three major construction companies in Sulaymaniyah.

Keywords: Employees Retention, Reward Management, Professionals Engineer in Constructive Industry

Introduction

Employee retention has become a central concern for organizations worldwide, particularly in sectors that rely heavily on skilled and experienced professionals. In the construction industry, retaining qualified engineers is crucial for sustaining operational efficiency, project continuity, and organizational performance. This study aims to examine the relationship between reward management and employee retention among professional engineers in construction companies in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan, Iraq.

Reward management, whether financial or non-financial, is widely recognized as a key strategic tool used to attract, motivate, and retain employees (Antoni et al., 2017). Organizations continue to refine their retention strategies because the departure of essential employees can disrupt operations and hinder growth (Armstrong, 2006). Motivated employees tend to remain longer with their employers, reinforcing the link between job

satisfaction and retention (Mowday, 1998; Ramlall, 2004). Armstrong (2007) further highlights that employment is not only a major source of financial stability and social standing but also a critical factor in fair and effective reward practices.

The importance of retaining experienced workers has escalated globally, as organizations seek to maintain economic competitiveness (Burke & Ng, 2006). Employers became increasingly aware of the negative consequences of turnover, including reduced productivity and higher operational costs, during the 1990s (Schuler, 2015). Although reward management has been widely discussed, scholars note a gap in literature exploring its role specifically within retention strategies (Leelavati & Chalam, 2017).

Reward management encompasses the policies, practices, and processes designed to recognize employees' contributions to organizational success (Armstrong, 2010). Effective reward systems should address employees' needs and demonstrate organizational commitment to their well-being (Rotich, 2020). Employees are considered critical competitive assets, and their knowledge and expertise are central to organizational success (Nayak, Jena & Patnaik, 2021). Retention strategies play a vital role in reducing turnover-related costs such as recruitment, training, loss of expertise, and decreased productivity (Elsafy & Oraby, 2022). Organizations that effectively address retention challenges are better positioned to maintain a stable and committed workforce (Jaseel, 2019).

In Iraq, the construction sector has expanded significantly due to governmental support (Abed, 2018). However, recent studies reveal a rising turnover trend among professional engineers, particularly in organizations that lack effective reward or talent management systems (Fadhil & Burhan, 2021). High expectations concerning compensation and benefits have also contributed to retention challenges in the Kurdistan Region (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Despite its economic importance, the construction industry remains under-examined in the literature (Ilikhanizadeh & Karatepe, 2017). Employee turnover continues to pose significant challenges for firms globally, affecting both competitiveness and organizational performance (Belete, 2018; Alias, 2018; Smith, 2018; Hussein, 2015). Turnover incurs substantial costs related to recruitment, lost productivity, and replacement training (Schlechter, 2016), prompting employers to prioritize the retention of skilled personnel (Al Mamun, 2017).

Employees may resign due to dissatisfaction, poor person–job fit, low appreciation, burnout, work–life imbalance, and diminishing trust in leadership (Branham, 2005). These issues have gained significant attention from management scholars and practitioners (Raj, 2013). Becker's (1962) human capital theory argues that investment in employee development enhances productivity and organizational performance. Strong interpersonal relationships, effective communication, and supportive work environments further reinforce retention (Osborne, 2017). Engagement is also recognized as a core mechanism that enhances employee satisfaction and reduces turnover (Carlton, 2011).

Reward management plays a pivotal role in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors (Hassoo & Akbay, 2020). Adequate compensation encourages employees to exert effort and remain with the organization (Rotich, 2020), while inadequate or unfair reward practices may lead to negative behaviors and reduced morale (Brar, Wadajkar & Kumar, 2019). Despite its

significance, scholars emphasize the need for further research on reward systems and their influence on retention (Brar, Wadajkar & Kumar, 2019).

Economic pressures in Iraq, such as the withdrawal of subsidies under IMF policies, have heightened unemployment and financial instability (WAG, 2011). The construction industry in Kurdistan also faces numerous challenges typical of developing economies, posing risks that could affect national economic development (Newington, 2022). Given these conditions, research on reward management and retention is essential to highlight employee value and its contribution to organizational success (Nayak, Jena & Patnaik, 2021).

This study therefore examines the level of reward management practices among engineers in the construction industry in Sulaymaniyah, the level of employee retention within the same workforce, and the relationship between reward management and retention. A cross-sectional quantitative approach was adopted, using a structured questionnaire administered to 114 professional engineers across three major construction companies in Sulaymaniyah. Data were analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation. Reward management serves as the independent variable, while employee retention is the dependent variable.

The study contributes both practically and theoretically. Practically, it provides insights into retention issues within private-sector construction companies in Kurdistan, an area with limited prior research. Theoretically, the study is grounded in the Conservation of Resources Theory, which explains how individuals strive to acquire, protect, and retain valuable resources. In contexts where resources are rapidly depleted, such as in Iraq, this theoretical lens becomes highly relevant for understanding retention behavior.

Research Objectives

RO1 To examine the perceived reward management among engineers in the construction industry in Sulaymaniyah.

RO2 To examine the level of perceived employee retention among engineers in the construction industry in Sulaymaniyah.

RO3 To examine the relationship between reward management and employee retention among engineers in the construction industry in Sulaymaniyah.

Literature Review

Reward Management

Reward management refers to the strategic design and implementation of financial and non-financial rewards that motivate, attract, and retain employees within an organisation. Contemporary literature describes reward management as a critical HRM function that integrates pay systems, benefits, recognition, and career development opportunities to enhance employee commitment and organisational performance (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). Modern organisations increasingly adopt a total reward approach, which combines intrinsic rewards such as meaningful work and recognition with extrinsic rewards such as salary, bonuses, and benefits (Aguinis et al., 2021).

In the context of engineering professionals, competitive reward structures are essential, as engineers typically work in high-demand and high-pressure environments requiring

specialised skills. Recent studies indicate that well-structured reward systems not only enhance job satisfaction but also strengthen employees' long-term attachment to their organisation (Otoo & Mishra, 2023). Specifically, researchers highlight that engineering sectors benefit from transparent reward systems that recognise technical expertise, innovation, and project performance (Alhadhrami et al., 2022). This ensures that employees perceive fairness in compensation and recognition, which subsequently increases retention rates.

Employee Retention

Employee retention refers to the organisational efforts and strategies aimed at maintaining a stable workforce by reducing turnover and encouraging employees to remain with their employer for extended periods. In recent years, employee retention has become a strategic priority due to rising global competition, labour shortages, and the cost implications associated with replacing skilled professionals (Deery & Jago, 2021). Retention is particularly important in the engineering and construction sectors, where the loss of skilled engineers can disrupt project timelines, increase operational costs, and reduce organisational productivity (Khalid et al., 2022).

Recent literature demonstrates that retention is influenced by several factors, including rewards, career development, leadership support, organisational culture, and job satisfaction (Nawaz et al., 2023). For professional engineers, retention is strongly shaped by opportunities for continuous learning, fair compensation, and recognition of their technical contributions. Several scholars have noted that employees are more likely to stay when they perceive equitable treatment and receive rewards that reflect their effort and expertise (Mensah, 2023). Employee retention, therefore, remains a multidimensional construct that requires organisations to consider both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators to sustain a stable engineering workforce.

Theoretical Foundation: Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory

This study is grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, both of which offer valuable insights into the connection between reward management and employee retention. Social Exchange Theory posits that relationships between employees and employers are based on reciprocal exchanges. When employees receive favourable treatment, such as competitive rewards, they reciprocate through loyalty, commitment, and long-term retention (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Recent research confirms that positive exchanges, particularly in the form of rewards and recognition, significantly influence employees' intentions to stay (Ren et al., 2022).

Conservation of Resources Theory further explains the role of rewards in reducing turnover. COR Theory suggests that individuals strive to acquire, protect, and enhance valuable resources, including monetary rewards, job security, and opportunities for growth (Hobfoll et al., 2018). When organisations provide adequate rewards, employees perceive an increase in valuable resources, which reduces stress and decreases the likelihood of leaving the organisation (Halbesleben et al., 2022). In engineering contexts, where workload pressure is typically high, reward systems that offer financial stability and skill development opportunities are especially effective in enhancing retention. Together, SET and COR provide

a strong theoretical basis to understand how reward management practices influence employees' decisions to remain within their organisations.

Reward Management and Employee Retention: Empirical Evidence

A substantial body of empirical research demonstrates the positive relationship between reward management and employee retention. Numerous studies indicate that competitive salaries, benefits, recognition programmes, and performance-based incentives significantly enhance employees' intention to remain with their organisation (Nyamekye et al., 2021; Otoo, 2022). Recent findings reveal that both financial and non-financial rewards contribute to increased job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and decreased turnover intentions (Kalyanamitra & Saengchai, 2023).

In high-skilled sectors such as engineering, the link between reward management and retention is particularly strong. Scholars emphasise that engineers value rewards that reflect their specialised knowledge, project contributions, and risk-taking behaviour in construction settings (Alqahtani & Leigh, 2022). A study by Mensah (2023) reported that reward fairness and clarity significantly improve retention among technical professionals, while inadequate or unclear reward systems increase the likelihood of employees seeking alternative employment.

Further evidence from emerging economies shows that effective reward systems reduce turnover by enhancing employees' physical and psychological well-being and fostering a sense of organisational belonging (Asiimwe & Nangoli, 2022). This indicates that organisations that prioritise comprehensive reward management experience higher employee stability and reduced replacement costs. Collectively, past empirical studies consistently highlight that reward management is a vital determinant of employee retention, especially in professional and technical industries.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence discussed, the conceptual framework for this study proposes a direct relationship between reward management and employee retention among professional engineers in the construction industry in Sulaymaniyah. The framework is grounded in the assumption that effective reward systems influence employee retention through mechanisms of reciprocity as suggested by Social Exchange Theory and through resource preservation as outlined by Conservation of Resources Theory.

In this framework, reward management is the independent variable, while employee retention is the dependent variable. The model assumes that higher levels of financial and non-financial rewards lead to higher levels of retention among professional engineers. Guided by the literature, this framework provides a systematic structure for examining how reward practices influence engineers' decisions to remain within their organisations. Figure 1 showed the proposed research framework.

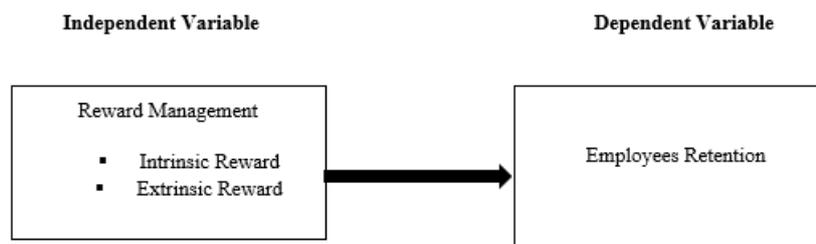


Figure 1 Research Framework

Methodology

Quantitative analysis is widely employed in social sciences and business research to provide empirical evidence and examine relationships between variables (Sekaran, Robert, & Brain, 2001; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Since correlational studies are non-experimental, researchers cannot manipulate or control variables. This study adopts a cross-sectional design.

The population for this study comprises 114 professional engineers from construction companies in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan. Convenience sampling was applied due to accessibility of respondents, and the entire population was included as the sample to enhance representativeness (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The construction industry in Sulaymaniyah is dominated by three major companies: Najmain Group, Qaiwan Group, and Halabja Group.

Measurement instruments were adapted from prior studies. Reward management items were adopted from Gunlu, Aksarayli, and Percin (2010), while employee retention items were adapted from Kindyt and Maya (2009). A five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was used, as it provides a balance between response reliability and respondent burden (Leung, 2011).

The questionnaire consisted of three sections: Section A captured demographic information, Section B measured the independent variable (reward management), and Section C assessed the dependent variable (employee retention). Reliability testing indicated Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.7, confirming the internal consistency of the instruments (Krejcie & Morgan, 2013).

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation analysis were conducted to examine the relationship between reward management and employee retention. Further details of the analysis procedures are presented in subsequent sections.

Result

The sample comprised 51.3% males and 48.7% females. Regarding age distribution, the majority of respondents (47%) were between 25–29 years, followed by 24.3% aged 30–34, 16.5% aged 35–39, 9.6% aged 40–44, and 1.7% aged 45–49, which represented the smallest group. In terms of educational qualifications, 78.3% of respondents held a bachelor's degree, 13.9% a master's degree, 2.6% a PhD, and 4.3% possessed other professional qualifications. Most respondents (53.9%) were unmarried. Regarding work experience, 44.3% had 1–5 years of experience, representing the largest group, followed by 27% with 11–15 years, 19.1% with

6–10 years, 5.2% with 16–20 years, and 3.5% with more than 21 years of experience. Distribution across companies showed that 60.9% of respondents worked in Najmadin Group, 31.3% in Qaiwan Group, and 7% in Halabja Group.

Reliability of the instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. According to Pallant (2020), values above 0.7 indicate acceptable reliability. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.992 for the independent variable (Reward Management) and 0.985 for the dependent variable (Employee Retention), indicating that the questionnaire items were highly reliable and valid.

Objective 1: Level of Perceived Reward Management

The results reveal that the level of perceived reward management is moderate, with a mean score of 3.4923. This indicates that although reward systems exist within the construction companies, they may not fully meet employees' expectations or align with best practices in the field. A moderate score suggests that engineers perceive rewards as somewhat adequate but not sufficiently compelling to strengthen motivation or organizational commitment.

This finding aligns with Armstrong (2014), who argues that reward management must be strategically designed to be competitive, fair, and aligned with employee needs. In contexts where rewards are inconsistent or perceived as inadequate, employees may experience reduced motivation or job satisfaction (Rotich, 2020). Given that the construction sector in Sulaymaniyah faces high competition for skilled engineers, moderate reward practices may limit companies' ability to attract and retain top talent. These results highlight a need for construction firms to revisit their reward strategies, ensuring they remain competitive both financially and non-financially.

Objective 2: Level of Perceived Employees Retention

The study also found that the level of perceived employee retention is moderate, with a mean score of 3.4496. This suggests that while some retention initiatives are in place, they may not be strong enough to sustain long-term employee loyalty. Engineers may be considering alternative employment opportunities due to unmet expectations, external labour market pull factors, or internal organisational challenges.

Scholars such as Belete (2018) and Alias et al. (2018) highlight that moderate retention levels often indicate underlying issues such as work overload, dissatisfaction with career advancement, or insufficient organisational support. Given the rapid growth of the construction industry in the Kurdistan region and the increasing demand for specialised engineering talent, moderate retention levels may pose a strategic risk to organisational stability.

Moreover, the findings support the argument by Hussein (2015) and Branham (2005) that employees leave when they feel undervalued, unsupported, or disconnected from organisational goals. For construction companies in Sulaymaniyah, this indicates a need to strengthen retention strategies through improved rewards, supportive leadership, and better career development structures.

Research Objective 3: Relationship between Reward Management and Retention

The correlation analysis revealed a very high and significant positive relationship between reward management and employee retention, with $r = 0.980$. This indicates that reward management is a strong predictor of engineers' intention to remain within their organisations. When employees perceive rewards as fair, competitive, and aligned with their efforts, they are more likely to demonstrate long-term commitment.

This finding is consistent with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), both of which suggest that employees reciprocate favourable treatment by enhancing their loyalty and maintaining their employment. Effective reward practices serve as a key organisational resource that reduces turnover intentions and reinforces employee engagement.

The result also aligns with empirical studies such as Brar, Wadajkar and Kumar (2019) and Nayak, Jena and Patnaik (2021), which demonstrate that competitive rewards significantly influence retention across various sectors. In the context of Sulaymaniyah, where engineers have high mobility and strong employment alternatives, the strength of this correlation underscores the critical importance of reward systems as a retention strategy.

The very high correlation found in this study suggests that improvements in reward management are likely to have a direct and substantial impact on reducing turnover among engineers in the construction industry.

Table 1

Summary of the Findings

| Research Objectives | Findings | Interpretation |
|--|---|--|
| RO1 To examine the perceived reward management among engineers in the construction industry in Sulaymaniyah. | Mean = 3.4923 (Moderate) | The level of perceived reward management is moderate. |
| RO2 To examine the level of perceived employee retention among engineers in the construction industry in Sulaymaniyah. | Mean = 3.4496 (Moderate) | The level of perceived employee retention is moderate. |
| RO3 To examine the relationship between reward management and employee retention among engineers in the construction industry in Sulaymaniyah. | R = 0.980** (Very High) | There is a positive significant relationship between reward management and employee retention. |

Discussion and Recommendation*Research Objective 1: Level of Perceived Reward Management*

The findings reveal that the level of perceived reward management among engineers in the construction industry of Sulaymaniyah is moderate, with a mean score of 3.4923. This

indicates that although reward systems are present, they are not fully developed or strategically implemented to meet engineers' expectations or remain competitive within the industry.

A closer examination of the reward components shows that base salary satisfaction recorded the lowest mean score of 3.1140, suggesting that engineers perceive their basic pay as inadequate or misaligned with industry standards. This result is consistent with Jedi (2022), who reports that base salary satisfaction is generally low in similar developing contexts. Moderate satisfaction was also observed regarding salary raises and increments, implying inconsistencies in pay adjustment policies. As argued by Oboreh and Arukaroha (2021), compensation structures must be transparent and fair to ensure that employees view the system as credible and equitable.

The findings further indicate that additional pay beyond the basic salary positively influences engineers' job satisfaction. This aligns with previous studies emphasising the importance of financial incentives in enhancing motivation and retention. However, despite the presence of such incentives, overall reward management systems in the construction sector remain underdeveloped. Mohammed (2020) highlights that reward management practices in Iraq are limited due to insufficient investment in HR systems and the lack of strategic prioritisation within organisations.

Recognition practices also received only moderate ratings from engineers, indicating that their contributions are not consistently acknowledged. Mejbil, Abdullah and Hussein (2023) emphasise that effective recognition systems—often supported through financial or symbolic rewards—are essential for reinforcing positive employee behaviours and strengthening organisational commitment. Similarly, performance feedback was perceived as only moderately implemented. This suggests a gap in continuous communication and developmental support, a concern supported by Metens et al. (2021), who argue that regular feedback enhances employee engagement and performance improvement.

A final contextual factor influencing reward management effectiveness is its relatively recent emergence in Iraq. Al-Jaleeli (2022) notes that reward management is still a developing concept in the region, and many organisations perceive it as an expensive and resource-intensive system. This perception is reinforced by Ali and Anwar (2021), who explain that the scarcity of HR expertise makes it challenging for organisations to implement advanced reward systems effectively.

Overall, the findings conclude that reward management practices among engineers in Sulaymaniyah are at a moderate level, reflecting structural, financial, and contextual limitations within the industry and the broader organisational environment.

Research Objective 2: Level of Perceived Employees Retention

The results indicate that the level of perceived employee retention among engineers in the construction industry of Sulaymaniyah is moderate. This suggests that while some factors encourage engineers to remain with their organisations, the overall retention climate is not yet strong enough to ensure long-term workforce stability.

One explanation relates to the demographic profile of the respondents, most of whom belong to the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts. These groups are characterised by high career mobility and strong expectations regarding compensation, career development, and work-life balance (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). Consequently, retention levels are influenced by the organisations' ability to meet these expectations, particularly through effective reward management (Barhate & Dirani, 2022).

Despite these moderate levels, engineers generally perceive a future in their current organisations, suggesting that the work environment is relatively healthy and supportive—an important factor for maintaining retention (Gorde, 2019). However, retention has been challenged in the post-pandemic context, as COVID-19 increased job insecurity and altered employee priorities, leading to a moderate retention climate in Kurdistan (Fadhil & Burhan, 2021).

Furthermore, employees may contemplate leaving if their expectations regarding salary, career advancement, or workplace flexibility are not met. This aligns with Ali and Anwar (2021), who report that unmet expectations and perceived inconsistencies in HR practices contribute to high turnover intentions among engineers in Kurdistan's construction sector.

Overall, while some positive factors exist, the moderate level of perceived retention highlights the need for organisations to strengthen strategies—particularly through effective reward management, career development, and supportive work environments—to retain talent over the long term.

Research Objective 3: Relationship between Reward Management and Retention

The correlation analysis indicates a very high and significant positive relationship ($r = 0.980$) between reward management and employee retention among engineers in the construction industry of Sulaymaniyah. This suggests that effective reward management is a key determinant in employees' decisions to remain with their organisations.

The finding aligns with prior studies, which demonstrate that well-designed reward systems, including both financial and non-financial rewards significantly enhance employee commitment and retention (Alhmoud & Rjoub, 2019; Alhmoud & Rjoub, 2020; Sadq, 2015). Michael et al. (2016) further emphasize that reward practices foster a sense of fairness and organisational value, which strengthens loyalty and reduces turnover intentions.

Additionally, the strong positive relationship reflects the career-oriented tendencies of Millennial and Generation Z employees, who are more likely to stay in organisations offering competitive rewards and career development opportunities (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). As Newton (2022) notes, continuous investment in effective reward systems is essential to sustaining high retention, particularly in dynamic sectors such as construction.

The findings also indicate that organisations actively monitor employee performance and provide developmental feedback which employees value. This highlights the importance of aligning knowledge-based talent development initiatives with organisational strategy (Liu, 2021). Moreover, employees demonstrate a preference for organisations that provide clear

career advancement pathways, further supporting the role of reward management in shaping retention outcomes.

While the study confirms a strong link between reward management and employee retention, it also recommends that organisations enhance their reward systems in multiple areas, ensuring they address employee needs effectively. Given the limited sample size and focus on a few private organisations in Sulaymaniyah, future research should expand the sample and scope to generalise findings across the broader construction industry in Kurdistan. Additional studies will also strengthen the theoretical and empirical understanding of reward management as a driver of employee retention in the region.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that both reward management and employee retention among engineers in the construction industry in Sulaymaniyah are at a moderate level, highlighting significant opportunities for improvement. While existing reward systems and retention strategies are in place, they are not yet fully strategic or robust enough to meet employee expectations or align with industry best practices.

The study also reveals a very high and significant positive correlation between reward management and employee retention, demonstrating that effective reward practices are crucial in retaining skilled engineers. This finding underscores the importance of both financial and non-financial rewards, performance feedback, and career development opportunities as key mechanisms to enhance employee commitment and reduce turnover. Despite the implementation of some reward and retention measures, the systems in the studied organisations require substantial enhancement to achieve higher effectiveness. Additionally, the study's focus on a limited sample of selected construction companies in Sulaymaniyah highlights the need for future research with broader coverage to generalize findings across the Kurdistan Region. Expanding studies in this area is particularly important, given the limited literature on reward management and employee retention within the local context.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of organisational practices in Sulaymaniyah by demonstrating that moderate levels of reward management and employee retention exist, and that reward management is a critical determinant of employee retention. These insights provide a foundation for organisations to improve their reward strategies, enhance employee satisfaction, and strengthen workforce stability.

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