

Enhancing Inclusive Reward Systems for Ageing Employees: A Strengths-Based Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Study in Singapore

Effarizan Melissa, Beni Widarman Yus Kelana, Almi Mahmud

Azman Hashim International Business School, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM
Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i5/28192>

Published Date: 11 May 2026

Abstract

Population ageing and increasing labour market pressures have made the retention and engagement of ageing employees a critical priority for organisations and policymakers. However, many existing reward systems remain narrowly focused on financial compensation and are insufficiently responsive to the evolving motivations, capabilities and aspirations of employees in later career stages. This limitation reduces the effectiveness of reward strategies in sustaining workforce participation and fully utilising accumulated experience. This study examines how inclusive reward systems can be enhanced for ageing employees in Singapore through a strengths-based Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach. Guided by the AI five-dimensional process, where the define stage is established during framing through the research questions and affirmative topic, followed by discovery, dream, design and destiny, the study explores positive experiences, aspirations and practical pathways for reward system improvement. Data are generated through narrative interviews in semi-structured format and focus group discussions with ageing employees, human resource practitioners and relevant stakeholders, conducted via a secure online meeting platform with audio recording in accordance with approved ethical procedures, with two pilot interviews undertaken for protocol refinement and excluded from analysis. The findings show that ageing employees value reward systems that extend beyond financial incentives to include recognition of experience, flexible work arrangements, lifelong learning and growth, wellbeing support and meaningful opportunities for contribution. Recognition emerges as a central mechanism that enhances the effectiveness of these reward dimensions by strengthening motivation, identity and organisational attachment. The study provides practical insights for organisations, human resource practitioners and policymakers seeking to design inclusive and effective reward systems, while contributing to theory by advancing a strengths-based and relational understanding of reward effectiveness in ageing workforce contexts.

Keywords: Ageing Employees, Inclusive Reward Systems, Recognition, Appreciative Inquiry (Ai), Workforce Ageing, Lifelong Learning And Growth, Singapore

Introduction

Population ageing represents one of the most profound structural transformations affecting contemporary labour markets and organisational systems. Increasing life expectancy, declining fertility rates and evolving retirement patterns have resulted in a growing proportion of ageing employees remaining economically active for longer periods. This shift has significant implications for how organisations design work, manage talent and structure reward systems. In particular, the sustainability of workforce participation increasingly depends on the extent to which organisations are able to motivate, recognise and retain ageing employees in meaningful ways (OECD, 2019).

Despite these demographic realities, many reward systems continue to reflect traditional employment models that prioritise short-term performance outcomes and financially driven incentives. While compensation and benefits remain important, such approaches are often insufficient to address the broader motivational, relational and developmental expectations of ageing employees. As career priorities evolve across the life course, employees in later stages increasingly value flexibility, wellbeing, opportunities for contribution and recognition of accumulated experience. The inability of conventional reward systems to respond to these shifting priorities creates a critical gap between organisational practices and workforce needs (De Vos et al., 2020).

This gap is not merely theoretical but has significant practical implications. Organisations that fail to design inclusive reward systems risk disengagement, loss of institutional knowledge and reduced workforce participation among ageing employees. Conversely, organisations that effectively align reward systems with employee needs can enhance retention, productivity and organisational sustainability. The issue is therefore of direct relevance to human resource practitioners, organisational leaders and policymakers seeking to address labour shortages and demographic ageing.

Within this context, recognition emerges as a particularly important yet underdeveloped dimension of reward systems. Existing literature often treats recognition as a supplementary or informal practice rather than as a central reward mechanism. However, recognition theory highlights that acknowledgement, respect and social esteem are fundamental to identity, motivation and participation (Honneth, 1995). For ageing employees, recognition plays a critical role in affirming continued relevance, countering age-related stereotypes and reinforcing a sense of belonging within organisations.

Singapore provides a strategically important setting for examining these issues. As a rapidly ageing society with strong policy emphasis on employability, re-employment and lifelong learning and growth, Singapore faces increasing pressure to sustain workforce participation among older employees. While national policies provide structural support, organisational reward systems ultimately shape how employees experience value, motivation and inclusion in practice (MOM, 2023). Understanding how reward systems can be redesigned to better recognise ageing employees is therefore both timely and necessary.

This study addresses these challenges by adopting a strengths-based Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to examine how inclusive reward systems can be enhanced for ageing employees. AI shifts the focus from problems to possibilities by exploring positive experiences,

aspirations and enabling conditions for change. Guided by the AI five-dimensional process, with the define stage occurring during framing through the research questions and affirmative topic, followed by discovery, dream, design and destiny, the study generates insights into how recognition-centred reward systems can be developed in practice (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

Data are generated through narrative interviews in semi-structured format and focus group discussions conducted via a secure online meeting platform with audio recording, in accordance with approved ethical procedures. Two pilot interviews are undertaken for protocol refinement and are excluded from analysis. This design enables the study to capture rich, contextually grounded insights into how ageing employees and organisational stakeholders interpret reward systems.

By focusing on recognition as a central reward mechanism, this study contributes to both theory and practice. It provides a stronger conceptual understanding of inclusive reward systems while offering practical guidance for organisations seeking to enhance workforce participation, employee engagement and long-term sustainability in ageing societies.

Problem Statements

A key issue underpinning this study is the growing mismatch between demographic realities and existing reward system design. While organisations increasingly rely on ageing employees to sustain productivity and workforce stability, many reward systems remain anchored in traditional, transaction-focused approaches that do not adequately reflect the evolving expectations of later-career employees (De Vos et al., 2020; OECD, 2019).

This misalignment has direct organisational consequences. When reward systems fail to recognise non-monetary contributions such as experience, mentoring capability and organisational knowledge, ageing employees may experience reduced motivation, diminished engagement and weaker attachment to the organisation. Such outcomes not only affect individual wellbeing but also undermine organisational effectiveness through the loss of valuable human capital (Armstrong, 2019; Becker, 1993).

Recognition represents a particularly critical yet underutilised mechanism within this context. Although recognition has strong theoretical grounding in shaping identity, motivation and social participation, it remains insufficiently integrated into formal reward system design (Honneth, 1995). This gap limits the ability of organisations to fully leverage the capabilities of ageing employees and to create inclusive environments that sustain long-term workforce participation.

Addressing this problem is therefore essential for organisations, policymakers and human resource practitioners seeking to enhance workforce sustainability. This study responds by examining how inclusive and recognition-centred reward systems can be developed through a strengths-based approach, providing both conceptual clarity and practical direction for improving reward effectiveness in ageing workforce contexts.

The Singapore context further heightens the relevance of this problem. Singapore is experiencing rapid demographic ageing while simultaneously pursuing national strategies

centred on employability, re-employment, skills upgrading and continued workforce participation. Although these initiatives provide important structural support, less is known about how ageing employees experience reward systems within organisations and how recognition can complement broader policy objectives. Without such understanding, workforce policies may be constrained by organisational practices that do not fully recognise or retain ageing talent (MOM, 2023).

Another gap in current scholarship is methodological. Much of the existing literature on reward systems and ageing employees relies on survey-based or policy-oriented approaches that identify constraints, deficits or retirement outcomes. Comparatively fewer studies employ strengths-based qualitative approaches that explore positive experiences, aspirations and enabling conditions for effective reward systems. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) offers a suitable framework for addressing this gap because it focuses on what works well, what employees value and how desired futures can be designed collaboratively. In this study, the AI five-dimensional process is adopted, with the define stage occurring during framing through the research questions and affirmative topic, followed by discovery, dream, design and destiny.

Accordingly, the central problem addressed by this paper is the limited understanding of how inclusive reward systems can be redesigned to recognise ageing employees as valuable contributors rather than as a workforce group requiring accommodation alone. This study responds to that problem by examining how strengths-based recognition practices, developmental opportunities and inclusive reward mechanisms can enhance motivation, belonging and sustained workforce participation among ageing employees in Singapore.

Literature Review

Ageing Employees and Contemporary Workforce Change

Population ageing has transformed labour market structures across many developed and emerging economies. Rising life expectancy, lower fertility rates and changing retirement patterns have increased the proportion of older individuals participating in paid work. Organisations are therefore managing increasingly age-diverse workforces in which ageing employees remain economically active beyond traditional retirement ages. This shift has important implications for talent management, organisational sustainability and reward system design (OECD, 2019).

Earlier literature frequently portrayed ageing employees through deficit-oriented narratives, emphasising physical decline, lower adaptability and reduced technological competence. Such assumptions influenced organisational practices that positioned older workers as a cost burden or transitional workforce segment approaching retirement. More recent scholarship has challenged these views by demonstrating that ageing employees often contribute organisational commitment, emotional regulation, tacit knowledge, mentoring capability and interpersonal maturity. These strengths indicate that ageing employees should be understood as strategic assets rather than passive recipients of late-career accommodation (Rowe and Kahn, 1997; Rudolph et al., 2020).

Sustainable career perspectives further reinforce this shift by conceptualising careers as dynamic processes shaped by health, productivity, happiness and long-term employability

across the life course. From this perspective, ageing employees require work environments that sustain motivation, development and person-career fit over time. Reward systems therefore become a central mechanism for supporting longer and more meaningful working lives (De Vos et al., 2020).

Reward Systems and Total Rewards Approaches

Reward systems traditionally refer to the formal and informal mechanisms through which organisations attract, motivate and retain employees. These systems commonly include direct financial compensation, incentives, benefits, recognition and career opportunities. Classical reward management approaches focused heavily on pay as the principal source of motivation. However, contemporary total rewards frameworks emphasise that employee engagement is influenced by a broader set of economic, psychological and relational factors (Armstrong, 2019).

For ageing employees, total rewards approaches may be particularly relevant because career motivations often evolve over time. While income security remains important, employees in later career stages may also prioritise flexibility, health-related support, meaningful work, reduced role strain and opportunities to contribute knowledge to others. Consequently, reward systems based solely on financial incentives may be insufficient to sustain motivation and retention among ageing employees (WorldatWork, 2015).

Human capital theory provides one explanation for why organisations should invest in inclusive reward systems. The theory suggests that education, experience and skills represent productive assets that generate economic value. Ageing employees frequently possess accumulated expertise and firm-specific knowledge that can be costly to replace. Reward systems that fail to retain and motivate such employees may therefore weaken organisational capability and continuity (Becker, 1993).

Recognition as a Strategic Reward Mechanism

Recognition has become an increasingly important dimension of reward scholarship, although it remains under-theorised relative to compensation and benefits. It refers to the acknowledgement of employees' contributions, competence, effort and social value. Recognition may occur formally through awards, performance systems and promotions, or informally through appreciation, respectful treatment, voice inclusion and everyday managerial behaviour.

A deeper conceptual foundation is provided by recognition theory, which explains that acknowledgement is fundamental to identity development, self-respect and social participation (Honneth, 1995). Within organisational contexts, employees who experience meaningful recognition are more likely to develop stronger commitment, belonging and motivation. Conversely, misrecognition or neglect may contribute to disengagement, alienation and reduced willingness to contribute.

For ageing employees, recognition may carry heightened significance because it helps counter stereotypes associated with decline or obsolescence. It affirms continuing relevance and validates accumulated experience. Recognition may also strengthen willingness to remain in employment, participate in organisational change and engage in mentoring or

developmental roles. Despite these benefits, many organisational reward systems continue to prioritise measurable performance outputs while underemphasising relational forms of reward that ageing employees may value highly.

Inclusive Reward Systems for Ageing Employees

Inclusive reward systems refer to reward practices intentionally designed to address the needs, preferences and contributions of diverse employee groups. In the context of ageing employees, inclusion requires moving beyond uniform reward models toward more flexible and responsive arrangements. This may include phased work options, flexible scheduling, health and wellbeing benefits, learning access, mentoring recognition and customised career pathways.

Research on age-inclusive human resource management suggests that equitable access to training, career development and supportive supervision can positively influence retention and engagement among older workers. However, fewer studies explicitly connect these practices to reward system architecture. This creates an important gap, because many inclusive practices operate as rewards even when they are not labelled as such. Flexibility, learning opportunities and meaningful voice can function as highly valued non-monetary rewards for ageing employees (Kunze, Boehm and Bruch, 2013).

The concept of lifelong learning and growth is especially relevant within inclusive reward design. Rapid technological change and digital transformation require employees across all age groups to update skills continuously. Where ageing employees are provided with access to development opportunities and recognised for learning participation, reward systems can reinforce employability and psychological growth rather than signalling late-career stagnation (Ng and Parry, 2016).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a Strengths-Based Lens

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provides a useful framework for examining reward systems from a strengths-based perspective. Rather than focusing on organisational problems, AI explores successful experiences, valued practices and future possibilities. Originally developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), AI has been widely used in organisational development to generate positive change through collaborative dialogue.

The present study adopts the AI five-dimensional process. The define stage occurs during framing through the research questions and affirmative topic, followed by discovery, dream, design and destiny. This framework is particularly appropriate for ageing workforce research because it shifts attention away from decline narratives and toward strengths, aspirations and enabling conditions. Within reward systems research, AI enables exploration of what ageing employees already value, what recognition practices have been effective and how more inclusive systems can be co-designed.

Using AI also aligns with positive organisational scholarship, which emphasises resilience, capability, human flourishing and human potential within workplaces. Such perspectives are valuable for redesigning reward systems that recognise ageing employees not as liabilities to be managed, but as contributors whose strengths can enhance organisational performance (Cameron, Dutton and Quinn, 2003).

Research Gap and Conceptual Direction

Although scholarship on workforce ageing, reward management and inclusion has expanded, several gaps remain. First, many studies continue to examine ageing employees through employability, retirement or productivity lenses while paying insufficient attention to reward system experience. Second, recognition is often treated as a peripheral management practice rather than a strategic reward mechanism. Third, limited research has explored these issues within Asian contexts such as Singapore, where demographic ageing and workforce participation policies are especially salient.

Methodologically, much of the existing literature relies on quantitative surveys or policy analysis. Comparatively fewer studies use qualitative strengths-based approaches to understand how ageing employees interpret recognition, rewards and organisational value. This paper addresses these gaps by using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to examine how inclusive reward systems can be enhanced through strengths-based recognition practices for ageing employees in Singapore.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to explore how inclusive reward systems can be enhanced for ageing employees in Singapore. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand participants' lived experiences, perceptions, meanings and aspirations regarding recognition, rewards and inclusive workplace practices. Qualitative inquiry is particularly valuable when examining complex organisational phenomena that involve social interaction, identity and context rather than measurable variables alone (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

AI provides the overarching methodological orientation for the study. Rather than focusing on problems or deficiencies, AI emphasises strengths, successful experiences, positive possibilities and collaboratively generated change. This orientation is especially suitable for ageing workforce research because it shifts attention away from decline-based assumptions and instead recognises ageing employees as capable contributors with valuable experience, strengths and future potential (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Framework

The study is guided by the AI five-dimensional process. The define stage occurs during research framing through the formulation of the research questions and the affirmative topic, namely enhancing inclusive reward systems for ageing employees. Following this framing stage, the study progresses through discovery, dream, design and destiny.

The discovery phase explores positive experiences of recognition, rewards and organisational support previously encountered by participants. The dream phase examines participants' aspirations regarding ideal reward systems and inclusive employment futures. The design phase focuses on practical structures, policies and reward mechanisms that could strengthen recognition and inclusion. The destiny phase considers sustainable actions, commitments and long-term strategies for embedding inclusive reward systems within organisations. This staged approach enables the study to generate both interpretive understanding and practice-oriented insights (Bushe, 2012).

Research Setting and Context

Singapore provides a relevant empirical setting due to its rapidly ageing population, high labour force participation objectives and strong policy emphasis on employability, re-employment and lifelong learning and growth. Organisations in Singapore are increasingly required to retain experienced employees while adapting reward systems to changing workforce expectations. This context offers a valuable setting for examining how recognition and inclusive rewards can support sustainable workforce participation among ageing employees.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study employs purposive sampling to recruit participants who possess direct knowledge or experience relevant to ageing employees and reward systems. Purposive sampling is suitable in qualitative studies where participants are selected based on their capacity to provide rich and relevant insights (Patton, 2015).

Three participant groups are included. The first group comprises ageing employees who can share lived experiences relating to recognition, rewards, inclusion and continued employment. The second group consists of human resource practitioners or managers involved in compensation, benefits, workforce planning or employee relations. The third group includes relevant stakeholders such as policymakers or professionals with expertise in ageing workforce issues. This multi-perspective design supports triangulation and a richer understanding of the phenomenon.

Data Collection Methods

Data are collected through narrative interviews in semi-structured format and focus group discussions. Narrative interviewing enables participants to share career journeys, reward experiences and interpretations in their own words, thereby generating rich accounts of meaning and identity. Semi-structured questioning also allows the researcher to probe issues relating to recognition, motivation, aspirations and inclusive reward practices while maintaining consistency across interviews (Riessman, 2008).

Focus group discussions are used to generate collective reflection and interactional insights concerning reward systems, organisational practices and future possibilities. Group dialogue is especially valuable within Appreciative Inquiry (AI) because participants can build on each other's ideas and co-construct visions of positive change.

Interviews and focus groups are conducted through a secure online meeting platform with audio recording, subject to informed consent and approved ethical procedures. This approach supports accessibility, confidentiality and flexible participation while ensuring accurate data capture for transcription and analysis.

Pilot Study

Two pilot interviews are conducted prior to the main study for protocol testing, sequencing of questions and refinement of interview procedures. Pilot testing helps assess clarity, flow and relevance of the data collection process. Data generated from pilot participants are excluded from the final analysis to preserve methodological distinction between testing and formal data collection.

Data Analysis

Data are analysed using thematic analysis informed by the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework. Thematic analysis is appropriate for identifying recurring meanings, patterns and interpretive themes across qualitative datasets (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcripts are reviewed repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data, followed by coding of meaningful segments relating to recognition, rewards, inclusion, aspirations and organisational enablers.

Codes are then organised into broader themes aligned with the AI process, including positive existing practices, desired future reward systems, organisational design priorities and sustainable implementation strategies. This analytical approach enables both inductive insight from participant narratives and deductive linkage to the strengths-based AI framework.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Several strategies are adopted to strengthen trustworthiness. Credibility is enhanced through triangulation across interviews and focus groups involving multiple participant categories. Dependability is supported through systematic documentation of procedures, coding decisions and analytical development. Confirmability is strengthened through reflexive awareness of researcher assumptions and transparent interpretation processes. Transferability is supported by providing rich contextual description of the Singapore setting and participant perspectives (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

The study is conducted in accordance with approved ethical procedures. Participants are informed of the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality arrangements and their right to withdraw. Informed consent is obtained prior to participation. Audio recordings, transcripts and related materials are securely stored and used solely for research purposes. Identifiable information is removed during reporting to protect participant privacy.

Methodological Contribution

By combining Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with narrative interviews, focus group discussions and thematic analysis, this methodology enables a strengths-based exploration of how inclusive reward systems can be enhanced for ageing employees. The design is particularly suited to uncovering positive experiences, aspirations and practical pathways for recognition-centred reward systems in Singapore.

Results

The thematic analysis generated several interrelated findings concerning how inclusive reward systems can be enhanced for ageing employees in Singapore. Guided by the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework, the results are organised around strengths, positive experiences, future aspirations and sustainable organisational practices. Across participant groups, the findings indicate that ageing employees value reward systems that extend beyond financial compensation and include recognition, flexibility, development opportunities, wellbeing support and meaningful contribution. These themes collectively suggest that inclusive reward systems should integrate transactional and relational dimensions of reward management.

Recognition as a Core Reward Preference

A dominant finding across interviews and focus group discussions was the importance of recognition as a meaningful reward. Participants consistently emphasised that acknowledgement of long-term service, accumulated expertise, loyalty and day-to-day contributions significantly influenced motivation and engagement. Recognition was not limited to formal awards or ceremonies, but also included respectful communication, appreciation from supervisors and opportunities to share expertise.

Many ageing employees reported that being listened to and treated as experienced contributors was more motivating than one-off financial incentives. Human resource participants similarly noted that recognition practices often have a stronger emotional and relational impact than purely monetary rewards. This finding supports previous scholarship suggesting that recognition contributes to identity, dignity and organisational commitment (Honneth, 1995).

The results indicate that reward systems should therefore embed recognition into routine managerial behaviour, performance discussions and organisational culture rather than treating it as an occasional symbolic gesture.

Flexible Rewards and Work Arrangements

A second major theme concerned the value of flexibility as a reward mechanism. Participants frequently described flexible work arrangements as highly important in later career stages, particularly where health, caregiving responsibilities or work-life balance priorities had become more salient. Flexible scheduling, hybrid work opportunities, reduced-hour arrangements and phased work options were viewed as forms of reward that signalled trust and respect.

Ageing employees indicated that flexibility often influenced their decision to remain in employment more than direct financial incentives alone. Human resource participants also recognised that flexible arrangements could strengthen retention and reduce premature workforce exit. These findings align with sustainable career perspectives, which emphasise person-career fit and long-term wellbeing across the working life course (De Vos et al., 2020).

The results suggest that organisations should conceptualise flexibility not merely as an accommodation, but as an inclusive reward component that enhances motivation and continued participation.

Lifelong Learning and Growth as Reward Value

Another prominent finding was the importance of lifelong learning and growth. Participants rejected assumptions that ageing employees are less interested in development or less capable of learning. Instead, many expressed strong interest in updating digital skills, participating in training and taking on new challenges when meaningful opportunities were available.

However, several participants indicated that development opportunities were sometimes disproportionately directed toward younger employees. This was perceived as a form of exclusion that undermined motivation and conveyed assumptions about diminishing future

value. Where organisations actively invested in training for ageing employees, participants described feeling respected, trusted and motivated.

These findings suggest that access to learning opportunities functions as a significant non-monetary reward. It signals organisational confidence in employees' future contribution while strengthening employability and self-efficacy. The results support human capital theory and recent research on learning across the lifespan (Becker, 1993; Ng and Parry, 2016).

Meaningful Roles and Opportunities to Contribute

Participants strongly valued opportunities to remain useful, relevant and impactful within the organisation. Many ageing employees described satisfaction derived from mentoring younger colleagues, solving complex problems, transferring institutional knowledge and contributing to organisational continuity. Meaningful contribution was often discussed as more motivating than traditional incentives.

Several participants expressed concern that some organisations gradually marginalise ageing employees by reducing responsibilities or excluding them from important projects. Such practices were interpreted as signals of declining organisational value. In contrast, roles that utilised expertise and enabled contribution were experienced as powerful forms of recognition.

The results therefore indicate that job design itself can function as a reward mechanism. Reward systems should not only determine what employees receive but also how organisations create opportunities for meaningful participation and continued contribution.

Wellbeing Support as Inclusive Reward Practice

Wellbeing emerged as another important theme. Participants associated supportive reward systems with health benefits, manageable workloads, psychological safety, respectful leadership and access to wellness initiatives. These elements were especially relevant for ageing employees seeking to sustain productivity while maintaining quality of life.

Human resource participants noted that wellbeing benefits are increasingly central to total rewards frameworks. Ageing employees, however, emphasised that wellbeing support must be genuine rather than symbolic. For example, wellness programmes were valued when accompanied by realistic workloads and supportive supervision.

The findings indicate that wellbeing support should be integrated into inclusive reward systems as a substantive dimension of organisational care and sustainable workforce participation.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Themes: Positive Futures for Reward Systems

The dream and design phases of the inquiry generated clear aspirations for future reward systems. Participants envisioned organisations where reward practices recognised diverse forms of contribution rather than narrowly measured outputs. Desired systems included flexible benefits menus, development pathways at all career stages, recognition-rich leadership cultures and age-inclusive performance management.

Participants also highlighted the need for intergenerational fairness. Inclusive reward systems were not framed as privileging ageing employees over other groups, but as recognising diverse employee needs across the workforce. This reflects the AI principle of designing positive systems that benefit the whole organisation rather than isolated groups (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

Integrated Results Synthesis

Overall, the results demonstrate that ageing employees interpret reward systems holistically. While fair financial compensation remains important, participants consistently emphasised recognition, flexibility, lifelong learning and growth, meaningful roles and wellbeing support as equally significant. These findings suggest that traditional compensation-centred models are too narrow for contemporary ageing workforces.

The results further indicate that recognition acts as an integrating mechanism linking other reward dimensions. Flexibility communicates trust, learning opportunities signal future value, meaningful roles affirm relevance and wellbeing support conveys care. In each case, the deeper reward is not only the resource provided but the recognition embedded within it.

Accordingly, inclusive reward systems for ageing employees should move beyond transactional exchange and adopt strengths-based designs that acknowledge experience, support aspirations and sustain workforce participation in ageing societies such as Singapore.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the research adopts a qualitative design using narrative interviews in semi-structured format and focus group discussions. While this approach provides rich and in-depth insights into participant experiences, it is not intended to produce statistical generalisation. The findings should therefore be understood as contextually grounded interpretations rather than representative conclusions for all ageing employees (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

Second, the study is conducted within the Singapore context, where labour market institutions, ageing policies and organisational practices may differ from those in other countries. As a result, direct transferability to other national settings should be approached with caution, although the broader insights may remain relevant to societies experiencing similar demographic trends (OECD, 2019).

Third, participant responses are based on self-reported perceptions and experiences. Although multiple participant groups were included to strengthen triangulation, subjective accounts may still be influenced by recall bias or social desirability. In addition, the pilot phase involved two participants for protocol testing only, and these data were excluded from the final analysis to maintain methodological rigour.

Fourth, the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework emphasises strengths, positive experiences and future possibilities. While this orientation is valuable for identifying constructive pathways for inclusive reward systems, it may place less emphasis on conflict, dissatisfaction or structural barriers that also shape workplace realities (Bushe, 2012).

Finally, data collection through a secure online meeting platform with audio recording supported accessibility and flexibility, but virtual interaction may limit some non-verbal cues compared with in-person engagement. Despite these limitations, the study offers a meaningful contribution to understanding how recognition-centred and inclusive reward systems can better support ageing employees.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that inclusive reward systems for ageing employees should be understood as multidimensional arrangements that extend beyond conventional compensation and benefits. While fair pay remains important, participants consistently emphasised recognition, flexibility, wellbeing support, lifelong learning and growth, and opportunities for meaningful contribution as equally significant sources of motivation. This supports contemporary total rewards perspectives, which argue that employee engagement is shaped by both financial and non-financial rewards (Armstrong, 2019; WorldatWork, 2015).

A central contribution of this study is the identification of recognition as a strategic reward mechanism rather than a peripheral management practice. Participants described acknowledgement, respect and being valued as powerful influences on motivation and continued workforce participation. This finding aligns with recognition theory, which suggests that social esteem and acknowledgement are fundamental to identity, dignity and participation (Honneth, 1995). In the context of ageing employees, recognition appears particularly important because it counters stereotypes of decline and affirms continuing relevance within organisational life.

The results also reinforce sustainable career perspectives. Participants did not frame later career stages as periods of disengagement, but as phases in which they sought meaningful work, flexibility and continued contribution. This supports the view that careers evolve across the lifespan and require organisational systems that sustain productivity, wellbeing and employability over time (De Vos et al., 2020). Reward systems that remain narrowly transactional may therefore be misaligned with the priorities of ageing employees.

Another important finding concerns lifelong learning and growth. Participants strongly valued opportunities to develop new skills and remain current in changing workplaces. Where learning opportunities were denied or implicitly directed toward younger employees, ageing employees interpreted this as a signal of reduced organisational value. Conversely, access to training was experienced as recognition of future potential. This extends human capital theory by showing that development opportunities do not only enhance productivity, but also communicate esteem and inclusion (Becker, 1993; Ng and Parry, 2016).

Flexibility also emerged as a critical reward dimension. Flexible scheduling, hybrid work and adaptable roles were often interpreted as expressions of trust and respect rather than merely administrative arrangements. This suggests that the symbolic meaning of rewards can be as important as their material value. Organisations that offer flexibility may therefore strengthen retention not only by easing practical constraints, but by signalling confidence in ageing employees' professionalism and autonomy.

Use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) contributes both methodologically and conceptually to reward systems research. Much prior literature focuses on deficits such as retirement pressures, declining productivity or skill obsolescence. By contrast, AI surfaces positive experiences, aspirations and workable solutions. The AI five-dimensional process, with define occurring during framing through the research questions and affirmative topic, followed by discovery, dream, design and destiny, enabled participants to articulate constructive pathways for future reward systems. This strengths-based lens is particularly valuable for ageing workforce scholarship because it repositions ageing employees as organisational assets rather than problems to be managed (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Bushe, 2012).

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organisations should redesign reward systems around inclusion and recognition. This may involve integrating formal appreciation practices, equitable development access, mentoring recognition, wellbeing benefits and flexible career pathways. Such measures are especially relevant in Singapore, where demographic ageing and workforce participation policies require organisations to retain and motivate experienced employees.

Importantly, the findings extend beyond theoretical contribution by demonstrating clear practical utility for organisations. Recognition-centred reward systems are not only conceptually relevant but operationally actionable. By embedding recognition within leadership practices, performance systems and everyday interactions, organisations can strengthen motivation, enhance retention and sustain workforce participation among ageing employees.

For human resource practitioners, the findings highlight the need to move beyond standardised reward structures toward more flexible and inclusive designs. This includes integrating recognition, lifelong learning and growth, flexible work arrangements and wellbeing support as core components of total rewards rather than supplementary initiatives. Such integration enhances the effectiveness of reward systems by aligning them with employee expectations across different career stages.

At the policy level, the study reinforces the importance of complementing structural initiatives with organisational practices that address lived employee experiences. While national policies in contexts such as Singapore promote employability and re-employment, their effectiveness ultimately depends on how organisations implement reward systems that recognise and retain ageing employees. The study therefore provides relevant insights for policymakers seeking to strengthen workforce participation strategies through organisational alignment.

Overall, the discussion indicates that inclusive reward systems are most effective when they combine economic fairness with relational recognition and developmental opportunity. Reward systems for ageing employees should therefore move from transactional exchange models toward human-centred systems that recognise capability, contribution and future potential.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that enhancing inclusive reward systems for ageing employees is not only a theoretical concern but a practical necessity in the context of demographic ageing and labour market transformation. The findings show that effective reward systems must extend beyond traditional compensation models to incorporate recognition, flexibility, lifelong learning and growth, wellbeing support and opportunities for meaningful contribution. Recognition emerges as the central mechanism through which these reward dimensions become meaningful and effective. By acknowledging the experience, capabilities and continued value of ageing employees, organisations can strengthen motivation, engagement and long-term workforce participation.

The study provides important implications for organisations, human resource practitioners and policymakers. It highlights the need to redesign reward systems in ways that are responsive to changing workforce demographics and evolving employee expectations. In doing so, it contributes to the development of more inclusive, sustainable and human-centred employment systems. Ultimately, this paper advances reward systems scholarship by demonstrating that effectiveness lies not only in financial incentives but in the integration of relational and strengths-based practices. Such an approach is essential for organisations seeking to remain competitive and sustainable in ageing societies.

References

- Armstrong, M. (2019). *Armstrong's handbook of reward management practice: Improving performance through reward*. London: Kogan Page Ltd.
- Becker, G. S. (1993) *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. United States: University of Chicago Press.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
- Bushe, G. R. (2012) *Appreciative inquiry: Theory and critique*. In Boje, D. M., Burnes, B. and Hassard, J. (eds.), *The Routledge companion to organizational change*. Oxford: Routledge, pp. 87-103.
- Cameron, K. S., Dutton, J. E. and Quinn, R. E. (2003) *An introduction to positive organizational scholarship*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Cooperrider, D. L. and Srivastva, S. (1987). 'Appreciative inquiry in organizational life', *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 1(1), 129-169.
- Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N. (2017) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*, 4th ed. United States: Sage Publications.
- De Vos, A., Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M. and Akkermans, J. (2020) 'Sustainable careers: Towards a conceptual model', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 117, 103196. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2018.06.011.
- Honneth, A. (1995) *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. The MIT Press. Available at <https://cristianorodriguesdotcom.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/honneth.pdf> (Accessed: 10 February 2026).
- Kunze, F., Boehm, S., & Bruch, H. (2013) 'Age, resistance to change, and job performance', *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 28(7-8), 741-760. doi: 10.1108/JMP-06-2013-0194.
- Lincoln, Y. S. and Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic inquiry*. United States: Sage Publications.

- Ministry of Manpower, MOM. (2023). Labour force in Singapore 2023. Singapore. Retrieved February 18, 2026, from <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Labour-Force-In-Singapore-2023.aspx>.
- Ng, E. S. and Parry, E. (2016) 'Multigenerational research in human resource management', *Research in Personnel and Human Resource Management*, 34, 1-41. doi: 10.1108/S0742-730120160000034008.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD. (2019). Working better with age. Paris: OECD Publishing. Retrieved February 17, 2026, from https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/working-better-with-age_c4d4f66a-en.html.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015) *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 4th ed. United States: Sage Publications.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008) *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 1st ed. United States: Sage Publications.
- Rowe, J. W. and Kahn, R. L. (1997) 'Successful ageing', *The Gerontologist*, 37(4), 433-440. doi: 10.1093/geront/37.4.433.
- Rudolph, C. W., Allan, B., Clark, M., Hertel, G., Hirschi, A., Kunze, F., Shockley, K., Shoss, M., Sonnentag, S. and Zacher, H. (2020) 'Pandemics: Implications for research and practice in industrial and organizational psychology', *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 14(1-2), 1-35. doi:10.1017/iop.2020.48.
- WorldatWork. (2015) *The WorldatWork handbook of compensation, benefits and total rewards: A comprehensive guide for HR professionals*. United States: Wiley Publisher.