

ASSESSING TOTAL REWARDS AND EMPLOYEE RETENTION AT A MUNICIPALITY IN KWAZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to attain a deeper understanding of the relationship between reward systems and employee retention at Municipality X in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The municipality regularly loses employees to other organisations, and this trend compromises productivity, negatively impacting service delivery and increases the costs of replacing valuable employees. This study identifies the challenges with the implementation of the municipality's reward systems, determines the effectiveness of these systems in enhancing employee retention and provide recommendations to address these.

The study uses a mixed methods approach and from a population of approximately 2700 employees of the Municipality, a sample of 105 employees was selected from each department. The findings revealed that although Municipality X has both intrinsic and extrinsic reward systems in place, they are not implemented effectively. This impacts negatively on its employee retention efforts. The challenges revealed are that reward systems are not designed with employees, there is no consultation with employees, there is insufficient education on reward systems and how they operate. The study recommends that the Human Resource Department of Municipality X strengthen their reward systems and actively involve employees in the design of these. This will increase the probability of retaining skilled employees in the organisation.

Key words: employee retention, reward systems, South Africa, service delivery

JEL classification: H70, H11

1. INTRODUCTION

Many organisations are faced with competition for skilled talent and experience leads high employee turnover (Masenya, 2022). Improved employee reward systems could be utilised as a tool to retain employees (Tumi, Hasan, & Khalid, 2022). There are many reasons that result in employees resigning from an organisation, and pull factors involve the attraction to a new job, or voluntary resignation of employees to join the private sector while push factors may be due to dissatisfaction with the current job which eventually encourages the employee to look for an alternative job elsewhere (Tessema, et al., 2022).

Municipality X like all other municipalities is governed by the South African Local Government Association, whereby municipalities were required to develop the Human Resources Management and Development (HRM&D) strategy. Municipality X developed and introduced its Talent Management Strategy during the 2014/2015 financial year. Despite the implementation of this strategy, Municipality X has lost many employees to other organisations. This compromises the quantity and quality of service delivery and also incurs significant costs of replacing those valuable employees. The Municipality X's Integrated Developmental Plan (IDP), under the Fourth (4th) Development Strategy of the Institutional Development, emphasises that it is important for organisations to build a healthy, harmonious and enthusiastic team that is committed to achieving the vision and mission of the Municipality.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first on investigating challenges around reward systems in this municipality. While other scholars have studied employee retention related challenges in various South African municipalities (e.g. Mello, & Thabayapelo, 2021; Makapela, & Mtshelwane, 2021; Nyide, 2022; Mokoena, Schultz & Dachapalli, 2022; Mchiza, 2023), this study is still necessary because of the importance of local government's role in being the

level of government responsible for service delivery. South African local government service in KwaZulu-Natal is generally inadequate, and studies such as these provide data that can be used to address employee related issues that may be unique to a locality.

The objective of this study is to investigate and understand challenges with the implementation of the reward systems and determine the effectiveness of these systems in enhancing employee retention. This study will assist the Executive Management at Municipality X on how to effectively utilise reward systems in retaining the employees to make sure that the mandate of providing the basic needs to its citizen is achieved. The two research questions of this study are,

- a) What are challenges with Municipality X's rewards systems?
- b) How effective are these reward systems in enhancing employee retention.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are multiple burdens that accrue to organisations beyond the obvious financial ones (such as advertising, recruiting, training amongst others, while a position is vacant) that arise from frequently replacing employees. According to Gorde (2019) turnover of employees is a costly occurrence, which is why organisations should implement the necessary interventions to retain the employees that they have invested in. Other costs to the organisation include lost productivity, destabilisation of organisational structures (Khan, 2021) and time that could have been spent chasing organisational objectives (Rodríguez-Sánchez, et al., 2020). The rate at which employees stay with an organisation has been shown to be influenced by factors such as work happiness, organisational commitment, and intention to leave (Gorde, 2019). Supervision and managerial style, working conditions, employee job fit and unmet job expectations contribute to factors mentioned in the previous sentence (Sawaneh and Kamara, 2019).

The role of reward systems as part of an employee retention strategy has received more attention, particularly in the last three years, as the world economy was shocked by and is coming out of the COVID lockdown induced economic hardships. In order to attract and retain talent, businesses must have a firm grasp on the myriad ways in which reward systems (remuneration, recognition and other incentives) affect employees' decisions about whether or not to remain in their positions (Pregolato, Bussin, & Schechter, 2017).

Some of the latest findings from the empirical literature on reward systems and employee retention are briefly discussed below. In an assessment of the effect of reward systems on staff retention in the Nigerian banking sector, Amadi, et al., (2021) find that salary and wages, career advancement and acknowledgement were important elements of incentive systems, and employee retention. Similar findings for the Kenyan banking sector are provided by Kamau and Omondi (2020). Rewards and compensation acted as a mediator between T&D and retention in the Maldives retail sector, (Hassan, 2022) while Al-Wareth et al., (2021) confirm this mediating role for employees in Yemen's banking sector.

There is a perception that generally, private sector remuneration is more attractive than that of the public sector is (Weerasinghe, Somawardana & Weerarathna, 2022). For example, Malaysia struggles with higher staff turnover in public hospitals as workers leave for jobs in the private sector (Yang, Saad & AlQershi, 2021). Similar occurrences have been experienced in Ethiopia and South Africa's public health system (Ayele, et al., 2020). The South African public school system also experiences high turnover of staff seeking jobs in private education (Dludla, 2019).

Reward systems may have different roles depending on the economic conditions prevailing at the time. For example, Nyeseh (2021) studies teacher retention in Ghanaian high schools and reports that the most important factor for teacher retention was receiving their salaries on time while training and development opportunities had much smaller effects. Issa and Bisaso (2020) report similarly in a study on retention practices in Rwandan private high schools.

Reward systems are aimed at satisfying the needs of both the organisation and its stakeholders and to operate fairly, equitably and consistently (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020).

Employee rewards are about the pay but also about non- financial reward such as recognition, learning and development and increased job responsibility (Chukwuma, et al., 2022). Financial rewards consist of job-based pay, this relates to pay related to the value of the job and person- based pay which acknowledges the individual's contribution (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2023). The concept of total rewards reward management which emphasizes the need to consider all aspects of the work experience of value to employees not just a few such as pay and employee benefits (Local Government Association, 2023).

Retention of employees requires reward systems which include various activities that ensure that the organisation attracts, retains, motivates and has developmental plans for their current workforce and future needs (Mabaso, 2021). Retention strategies are aimed at ensuring that key employees stay within the organisation and that the wasteful and expensive levels of employee turnover are reduced. On the other hand, Ghani et al., (2022) defines retention as a strategy that includes all activities an employer does to encourage qualified and productive employees to continue working for the organisation.

2.1. THEORY: SELF DETERMINATION THEORY

Deci and Ryan's Self – Determination Theory (2008) provides a social cognitive theory of motivation which asserts that humans have a basic need for competence, autonomy and relatedness. The various concepts can be defined as: competence – the experience of mastery and being effective in one's activity (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Autonomy – the feeling that one has choice and willingly promoting themselves (Deci & Ryan, 2008); relatedness – the need to feel connected and a sense of belonging with others (Deci & Ryan, 2008). By satisfying these needs, one promotes optimal motivational traits and effective engagement, be it in the workplace or in society. further concluded that there is a correlation between these rewards and the employee retention.

According to Deci and Ryan (2015) intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards are highly influential determinants of behaviour. Providing these rewards increases workers drive and motivation to meet their needs in the workplace. Intrinsic rewards refer to the inner satisfaction that one gets from the job itself. This kind of satisfaction is a self-initiated reward, like taking in one's work, having a feeling of accomplishment, or being an important part of a team (Deci & Ryan, 2015). Some organisations offer certain techniques such as flexible working time, shorter weeks' work, job enrichment and job rotation. All these techniques can offer intrinsic rewards as they provide interesting and challenging jobs at the same time allowing an employee greater freedom. Bhavya and Satyavathi (2017) adds that recognizing employees and offering them responsibilities comprehends their value in an organisation, thereby enhancing their level of motivation and desire to stay.

Extrinsic rewards are external to the job and are provided by outside sources such as management or employer. Extrinsic rewards are not self-initiated and comprise of money, promotions, and fringe benefits. If an employee experiences a feeling of achievement or personal growth from a job, that is associated with intrinsic rewards. If the employee receives a salary increase, added job benefits that would be labelled as extrinsic rewards (Deci & Ryan, 2015). It therefore suffices to conclude that both the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are closely linked and play a big role in enhancing employee retention (Deci & Ryan, 2015).

The financial wellbeing of employees may or may not be augmented by rewards. If rewards do augment the financial well-being of an individual, it can be through direct wages/ salaries, bonuses and the like, or indirectly through benefits such as pension, paid vacations, paid sick leaves alike. Monetary and monetary rewards are crucial as they make employees feel appreciated and valued (Machova, et al., 2022).

Non-financial rewards are potentially at the hands of the organisation or employer. They do not have a direct impact on the employees' financial position but make the employees life better on the job (Uzair and Mehmood, 2022). Non-financial rewards are designed to make life on the job

more attractive. These include but not limited to career advancement opportunities, employee recognition programs, job security and employee empowerment.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The target population are the employees of Municipality X who, at the time were approximately 2700. The researchers were granted permission by the Municipality to conduct a study and utilise the employees time in completing the questionnaire. This study uses a stratified sampling technique to ensure that each department is represented. 105 questionnaires with the Likert type scale closed questions were distributed to participants all were completed. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation analysis was also employed to establish the correlation of the independent variable (reward systems) with dependent variable (employee retentions). After this, regression analysis was also employed to establish the weight of the independent variables in prediction of work engagement.

To ensure reliability of the study, questionnaires were distributed to a group of 5 participants as a pilot study in order to pick up any flaws in the questionnaires and since no issues were identified, the formal study proceeded. All necessary measures that could eliminate biasness were put in place so that the expected results would not be distorted. The questionnaire was distributed to all six departments within the Municipality; thus every employee had an equal chance of participating. The participants as per the sample selection were not discriminated by race, religion, sex, age, demographic and tenure. In terms of informed consent, the researchers provided sufficient information about the purposes of the study to all participants, to allow them to make a rational decision and no participants were forced to participate in the study. Participants were assured of their right of their privacy and assured that their identity will remain anonymous.

Table no. 1. Population and sample size

Department	Population	Sample size
City Development	75	12
Community Services	1280	24
Corporate Services	130	15
Electrical and Energy	275	18
Infrastructure	790	19
Financial Services	150	17
Total	2700	105

Source: Authors' calculations

4. RESULTS

The Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient of which is a measure of internal consistency of questionnaires, was acceptable at 0.91 (Average interim covariance 0.22 and number of items in the scale = 26). Cross tabulations were also run in SPSS Version 26 to examine the relationships between the variables. Table 2 below shows the cross tabulation for age, level, and period in organisation, and reveals that 10 employees aged below 35 years, with less than 10 years of experience are in managerial positions.

Table no. 2. Cross tabulation for age, level and period in organisation

Level			Age		Total
			Below 35 years	Above 35 years	
Administrative	Years in organisation	Below 10 years	9	19	28
		Above 10 years	8	15	23

	Total		17	34	51
Managerial	Years in organisation	Below 10 years	10	19	29
		Above 10 years	7	18	25
	Total		17	37	54
Total	Years in organisation	Below 10 years	19	38	57
		Above 10 years	15	33	48
	Total		34	71	105

Source: Authors' calculations

Table 3 below shows responses to questions related to answering the first research question about challenges that the municipality faces with its reward systems and the discussion that follows uses the same table.

Table no. 3. Challenges with rewards systems

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
The concept of reward systems has been explained to me by my employer	34%	21%	11%	10%	24%
I was involved in the planning and design of my reward system	46%	37%	7%	5%	5%
I am aware of delivery systems needed in order to be rewarded	38%	23%	0%	23%	16%
My performance and rewards are aligned	10%	9%	1%	40%	40%
The reward systems offered by my organisation are aligned with other similar organisations	0%	12%	0%	56%	32%

Source: Authors' calculations

Research question 1: What are the challenges with Municipality X's rewards systems?

The concept of reward systems has been explained to me

34% of the participants agreed while a similar number disagreed that reward systems were explained to them. If one third of employees have not been informed of the reward system at the municipality, this could lead to tensions that can be avoided. 55% (34% + 21%) of the respondents disagreed that they were satisfied with the extent to which the employer explained the concept of reward systems. Proper communication of rewards delivers the unique benefits that employees would enjoy from their association with the organisation in a very personal, one-on-one manner (Chapman and White, 2019). Laundon, Cathcart & McDonald (2019) also show the importance of employers' clear communication with employees of benefits as this affects perceptions of fairness - some employees may feel that they are being discriminated against in the absence of good communication. It was important to establish the extent to which the

respondents acknowledged that the concept of reward systems has been explained to them by their employer.

Involvement in planning and design of reward system

It was also important to comprehend the extent to which the respondents were involved in the planning and design of their reward system. 83% (46% + 37%) of the respondents disagreed that they were involved in the planning and design of their reward system. The design of a reward system for employees should take consideration of different personalities. Determining what motivates an employee and being interested in what they desire and making that materialise could be the best reward system.

Awareness of key performance indicators needed for rewards

It was important to establish the level of awareness of delivery systems needed for them to be rewarded. There seems to be a high employee unawareness of the KPIs needed for rewards to be granted as half the respondents (38% + 23%) disagreed that they were the aware of delivery systems needed for them to be rewarded.

Alignment of performance with rewards

Performance and reward strategies are grounded on the premise that employees are not intrinsically born with the desire to work and exert maximum effort every day, hence the need for an employer to motivate and maximize employee performance by implementing a reward system (Shields et al., 2020). An effective performance and reward strategy must be aligned to goals and objectives of the organisation. It was also important to comprehend the extent to which the respondents perceived that their performance and rewards were aligned. 40% of the respondents strongly agreed, and 41% of the respondents agreed that their performance and rewards were aligned. However, 9% disagreed, 10% of the respondents strongly disagreed, while 1% were neutral on the notion that their performance and rewards were aligned.

Alignment of reward systems with other similar organisations

The alignment of reward systems with other similar organisations allows the organisation to remain competitive in the market. External equity occurs when a firm's salary rates are at least equal to the average pay rates in the organisation's sector or market (Zina, 2018). It was also important to comprehend the extent to which the respondents perceived that the reward systems offered by their organisation were aligned with other similar organisations. 55% of the respondents agreed, and 32% of the respondents strongly agreed that the reward systems offered by their organisation were aligned with other similar organisations. However, 12% of the respondents disagreed on the notion that the reward systems offered by their organisation were aligned with other similar organisations. Sinambela, Darmawan, and Mendrika (2022) highlight the importance of reward strategy alignment with that of other organisations as part of corporate strategy. Table 4 below displays questions that used to answer the second research question about the effectiveness of retention systems at the municipality.

Research question 2: How effective are these reward systems in enhancing employee retention?

Table 4. Effectiveness of reward system in enhancing employee retention

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I am satisfied with my salary.	14%	7%		38%	41%
My salary is competitive	10%	13%	5%	33%	39%

The benefits offered by my employer are satisfactory	58%	6%	4%	9%	23%
The organisation is investing on my Training and Development.	47%	29%		16%	9%
Good performance is rewarded by the organisation	42%	48%		10%	
The responsibilities I have motivate me to stay in this organisation.		2%		66%	32%
I am encouraged to upgrade my skills		13%		31%	56%

Source: Authors' calculations

Satisfaction with salary

The relationship between salaries and job satisfaction is vital for enhancing employee motivation, that would in turn escalate employee productivity. Pay is a crucial factor for organisations to hire high quality employees during recruitment and retain these employees (Madhani, 2019). It was important to comprehend the extent to which the respondents were satisfied with their salaries. 41% of the respondents strongly agreed, and 38% of the respondents agreed that they were satisfied with their salaries. However, 14% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 7% of the respondents disagreed on the notion that they were satisfied with their salaries.

Salary is competitive.

Most employees agreed that (39% + 33%) they felt that their salaries were competitive. Organisations compete to retain or attain the top-grade employees and evaluation and provision of competitive salaries in the market allows the organisation to remain competitive (Amarakoon & Colley, 2022). It was important to comprehend the extent to which the respondents felt that their salaries were competitive.

Satisfaction with benefits offered by employer

A solid employee benefits package is a good strategy for attracting and retaining talent, and offering monetary and non-monetary benefits to employees is vital since it reveals that an organisation has invested in their overall health and their future (Iqbal, Guohao and Akhtar, 2017). It was crucial to establish the level of satisfaction with benefits offered by employer. 58% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 6% of the respondents disagreed that they were satisfied with benefits offered by employer. However, 9% of the respondents agreed and 23% strongly agreed, while 4% were neutral on the notion that they were satisfied with benefits offered by employer.

Investment in training and development

Organisations that invest in training and development programs for their employees are relatively more flexible in the market and are better able to respond to changes in the market (Noe and Kodwani, 2018). It was crucial to establish the level of satisfaction with the extent to which Municipality X was investing in employee training and development. 47% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 29% of the respondents disagreed that they were satisfied with the extent to which Municipality X was investing in employee training and development. benefits offered by employer. However, 16% of the respondents agreed and 9% strongly agreed

on the notion that they were satisfied with the extent to which Municipality X was investing in employee training and development.

Rewarding good performance

It was also important to comprehend the extent to which the respondents felt that Municipality X was rewarding good performance. 48% of the respondents disagreed, and 43% of the respondents strongly disagreed on the notion that Municipality X was rewarding good performance. However, 10% of the respondents agreed with the notion that Municipality X was rewarding good performance. Tarigan et al., (2022) find that a total rewards system that includes both monetary and non-monetary rewards is important for enhancing morale and output in the workplace.

Responsibilities motivate to stay in organisation

It was also vital to comprehend the extent to which the respondents perceived that their responsibilities motivated them to stay at Municipality X. 66% of the respondents agreed, and 32% of the respondents strongly agreed that their responsibilities motivated them to stay at Municipality X. However, only 2% of the respondents disagreed on the notion that their responsibilities motivated them to stay at Municipality X.

Encouragement to upgrade skills

It was also important to appreciate the extent to which the respondents perceived that Municipality X encouraged them to upgrade their skills. 56% of the respondents strongly agreed, and 31% of the respondents agreed that Municipality X encouraged them to upgrade their skills. However, 12% of the respondents disagreed on the notion that Municipality X encouraged them to upgrade their skills.

Awareness of the reward systems policy

The respondents were also asked to state if they were aware of the reward systems policy and understood its content. The responses were positive; however, the prevailing policies were ill-understood and there were no workshops conducted in order to help the employees understand the content of these policies. Moreover, there was a lot of misinterpretation of policies by the employees.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although most respondents agree that they are satisfied with the salaries they receive, and they are competitive. It is important to also note that for an employee to feel valuable, there must be a balance between monetary and non-monetary benefits. A lack of training and development is an alarming factor for any organisation. It simply means its employees are not keeping up with the changes in their respective work specialties. They might be retaining redundant information. Leave benefits are equally important as they have a direct impact on an employee's health and wellbeing.

There are serious financial implications that come as a result of employee turnover. In the current tough economic conditions, it is in the best interests for organisations to strive to keep their skilled and experienced employees within the organisation to ensure firstly skills transfer, employee succession and most importantly cut down of unnecessary costs of sourcing new skills for the organisation. A human element is also important in successful organisation. Non-monetary benefits are also an important factor to be taken seriously.

In relation to explanation of the concept of reward systems, given the scenario at Municipality X, it is imperative that the human resource function should monitor all reward communication processes and strategies against pre-defined objectives and success criteria to expedite continuous improvement in reward communication. There should be a proper blueprint for the promotion of reward system both internally and externally, embracing which specific target audience should receive communication, through which communication channels as well as the frequency of communication.

It is important that the management at Municipality X investigate the key issues that matter to their employees. The investigation can be accomplished by asking employees what motivates them and what rewards they feel are appropriate for their positions and job objectives. It is worth mentioning that everyone is different and if possible, the incentives should vary from individual to individual. Decisions should be made on whether financial or self-esteem increasing efforts are suitable for each individual employee, and the reward system should reinforce positive behaviour.

It is important that the management at Municipality X design rewards structures through consultation. The investigation can be accomplished by asking employees what motivates them and what rewards they feel are appropriate for their positions and job objectives. It is worth mentioning that everyone is different and if possible, the incentives or rewards should not be applied in an umbrella approach. Decisions should be made on whether financial or self-esteem increasing efforts are suitable for each individual employee, and the reward system should reinforce positive behaviour.

Although the salaries are competitive, it is suggested that Executive Management also revises its strategic objective of Human Resource Development programs. Policies pertaining to employee wellness need to be revisited and reviewed, rewards systems need to be reviewed as well. During the process of review, employees need to be consulted, irrespective of their position in the organisation. On the other hand, the respondents also feel, when it comes to other benefits such as leave, training and development, performance management the organisation is not doing enough. The organisation does not seem to be rewarding good performance either.

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