

# Reward Management Practices and Employee Retention in Star-Rated Hotels in Nakuru County, Kenya: The Moderating Role of Hotel Rating

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**Abstract:** High staff turnover continues to raise costs and weaken service quality in Kenya's hotel industry, yet little is known about which reward practices keep employees in star-rated hotels outside Nairobi. This study examined the relationship between four reward management practices – career development, job promotion, remuneration and employee recognition – and employee retention in star-rated hotels in Nakuru County, Kenya, and tested whether hotel rating moderates these relationships. Guided by the Job Demands-Resources Theory, Self-Determination Theory and the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity Theory, the study adopted a correlational design and a census of 152 departmental heads in the nineteen hotels classified by the Tourism Regulatory Authority. Usable questionnaires were returned by 142 respondents (93.42%). Multiple and hierarchical regression showed that employee recognition ( $\beta = 0.462$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and remuneration ( $\beta = 0.341$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly predicted retention, whereas career development ( $\beta = 0.128$ ,  $p = .142$ ) and job promotion ( $\beta = 0.089$ ,  $p = .377$ ) did not. The four practices explained 50.7% of the variance in retention, rising to 56.0% when hotel rating and interaction terms were added ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.053$ ,  $p = .044$ ). Only the recognition  $\times$  hotel rating interaction was significant ( $\beta = 0.104$ ,  $p = .045$ ), indicating that recognition has a stronger effect on retention in higher-rated hotels. Hotels should benchmark pay and formalise recognition, with lower-rated hotels investing deliberately in recognition programmes.

**Keywords:** Reward Management, Employee Retention, Employee Recognition, Remuneration, Hotel Rating, Hospitality Industry

## Research Highlights

1. Recognition ( $\beta = 0.462$ ) and remuneration ( $\beta = 0.341$ ) significantly predict retention in Nakuru star-rated hotels.
2. Career development and job promotion do not independently predict employee retention.
3. Hotel rating moderates only the recognition-retention link, which is stronger in higher-rated hotels.
4. Reward practices and hotel rating explain 56.0% of retention variance among 142 departmental heads.

## 1. Introduction

Tourism and hospitality accounted for about 10% of global gross domestic product in 2024 and supported some 357 million jobs [1]. The core product of a hotel is the guest experience, which is delivered by front office staff, housekeepers, chefs, waiters and supervisors; retaining competent and motivated employees is therefore a strategic concern rather than a purely administrative one. The hospitality workforce has, however, long been characterised by low pay, irregular hours, short career ladders and high turnover, weaknesses that the COVID-19 pandemic deepened [2].

In Kenya, the sector is expanding rapidly. International arrivals reached a record 2.4 million in 2024, and tourism earnings rose from KSh 377.49 billion in 2023 to KSh 452.20 billion [3]. Growth of this kind can only be served by a stable and experienced workforce, yet turnover in Kenyan star-rated hotels has been estimated at about 68% in five-star hotels, against a global average of 31% [4], and at more than 72% in Nairobi's star-rated hotels by 2021 [5]. Recruitment, training and onboarding can absorb nearly half of total staffing costs [6], so these departures carry a heavy financial and service penalty.

Reward management – the strategies, policies and processes used to reward people fairly and consistently in line with their value to the organisation [7] – is among the most frequently studied responses to this problem. Nakuru County offers a suitable setting for examining it. The county hosts nineteen star-rated hotels, ranging from two to five stars, that serve leisure, business, conference and transit guests. Because higher-rated hotels generally have more resources and more structured human resource systems, the same reward practice may not affect retention equally in every hotel. This paper reports a study that examined the relationship between four reward practices and employee retention in these hotels and tested whether hotel rating moderates that relationship. The remainder of the paper surveys

the literature, defines the problem and objectives, sets out the methodology, reports and discusses the results, and identifies directions for further work.

## 2. Literature Survey

### 2.1 Reward management and employee retention

The link between rewards and retention rests on classic motivation theory. Herzberg et al. [8] associated satisfaction at work with pay, recognition, advancement and growth, while Adams [9] argued that employees compare what they contribute with what they receive and withdraw when the exchange appears unfair. Recent studies support these propositions: total rewards have been found to affect retention significantly, with effects that differ across generations [10], and talent practices in star-category hotels in India have been linked to the retention of skilled staff [11]. Kenyan research shows that human resource practices shape hotel performance and service delivery in Mombasa and Machakos counties [12], [13], but these studies did not take retention as their outcome or examine Nakuru County.

### 2.2 Career development and job promotion

In three- to five-star hotels in Nairobi, human resource policy and job rotation were positively associated with retention [14], and mentorship, leadership development and education assistance were examined as retention practices in a single Nairobi hotel [15]. A survey of 769 frontline hotel employees in Ghana showed that leadership and social expectations shape career attitudes and intentions, although intentions were not tested against actual retention [16]. For promotion, a positive correlation with retention ( $r = .404$ ) was reported in Nairobi's top-rated hotels [17], while a study of 250 hospitality professionals found that satisfaction with promotion depended on perceived fairness and transparency rather than job position [18]. Employees in Kenyan hotels after the pandemic valued progression but were dissatisfied with salary levels [19].

### 2.3 Remuneration and employee recognition

Compensation has been negatively associated with turnover intention in Jakarta's five-star hotels [20]. In Nairobi's star-rated hotels, indirect and non-financial compensation, but not base pay, were related to turnover [21], and compensation strategies in five-star hotels have been mapped against turnover [22]. Recognition, together with remuneration, work-life balance and involvement, was negatively and significantly associated with turnover intention in Nairobi's hospitality industry [23], while employee benefits and the work environment predicted retention among hospitality managers [24]. A total reward perspective argues that financial and non-financial rewards should be managed together if seasonal and skilled staff are to be retained [25].

### 2.4 Hotel rating as a moderator

Moderation has been applied in Kenyan hotel research, for example in testing working conditions as a moderator of the remuneration-performance relationship [26]. Studies that sampled hotels of different star ratings [14] did not, however, test whether rating changes the strength of reward-retention relationships. Including hotels of several categories in a sample does not establish moderation; an explicit test of interaction is required. This gap motivated the treatment of hotel rating as a moderating variable in the present study.

### 2.5 Theoretical framework

Three theories framed the study. The Job Demands-Resources Theory [27] holds that job resources such as training, clear promotion routes and fair pay buffer the physical and psychological costs of demanding work and so reduce withdrawal; hotel work, with long shifts, peak seasons and demanding guests, is a clear example of a high-demand job. Self-Determination Theory [28] explains retention through the satisfaction of needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, which recognition and development directly address. The Ability-Motivation-Opportunity Theory [29], [30] treats career development as building ability, promotion as providing opportunity, and remuneration and recognition as supplying motivation, and implies that the effect of these practices may vary with the human resource capacity associated with a hotel's rating. Figure 1 presents the resulting conceptual framework.

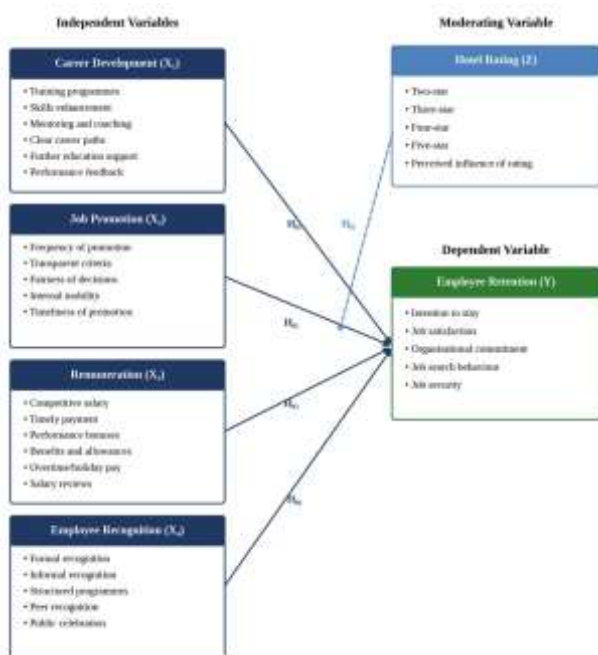


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of reward management practices, hotel rating and employee retention.

## 3. Problem Definition

Star-rated hotels in Kenya continue to lose trained employees despite the introduction of various pay and promotion measures, and weak reward management – poor pay, limited career development, few promotion opportunities and little recognition – is frequently cited as a cause. Existing Kenyan studies have concentrated on Nairobi, on single reward practices, or on turnover intention and performance rather than retention, and none has tested whether hotel rating moderates the reward-retention relationship. Managers in Nakuru County therefore lack local evidence on which practices actually encourage employees to stay.

The general objective was to examine the relationship between reward management practices and employee retention in star-rated hotels in Nakuru County, Kenya. The specific objectives were:

- To determine the relationship between career development and employee retention;
- To examine the relationship between job promotion and employee retention;
- To establish the relationship between remuneration and employee retention;
- To assess the relationship between employee recognition and employee retention; and
- To establish the moderating effect of hotel rating on the relationship between reward management practices and employee retention.

Corresponding null hypotheses  $H_{01}$  to  $H_{05}$  stated that no statistically significant relationship or moderating effect exists in each case.

## 4. Methodology / Approach

### 4.1 Research design

A correlational research design was adopted, since the study sought to establish the strength and direction of relationships among variables as they existed in the hotels, without manipulation [31]. Because a correlational design cannot establish causation, the findings are interpreted as statistical associations and predictive relationships.

### 4.2 Study area and population

The study was conducted in the nineteen star-rated hotels in Nakuru County licensed and classified by the Tourism Regulatory Authority: two five-star, seven four-star, five three-star and five two-star hotels. The target population comprised 152 departmental heads, eight from each hotel, drawn from front office, housekeeping, food and beverage, administration, sales and marketing, human resources, security, and engineering and maintenance. Departmental heads were chosen because they have first-hand knowledge of staffing, reward decisions and the reasons employees stay or leave. Given the small population, a census was used.

### 4.3 Instrument and data collection

Data were collected with a structured, self-administered questionnaire measuring each construct with ten items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) [32]. The instrument was piloted with 15 departmental heads in Nairobi County, who were excluded from the main study. Data collection followed approval by the Kabarak University Research Ethics Committee, a NACOSTI research permit and permission from each hotel. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and responses were coded before analysis.

#### 4.4 Reliability and validity

Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.950 (career development) to 0.969 (employee recognition and employee retention), well above the 0.70 threshold [33]. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin values ranged from 0.887 to 0.944, above the 0.70 benchmark [34], and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $p < .001$ ) for all constructs [35]. Content validity was established through supervisor review of item clarity, relevance and coverage.

#### 4.5 Data analysis

Data were analysed in SPSS version 27 using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression and hierarchical regression. The direct effects model was  $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3 + \beta_4X_4 + \epsilon$ , where  $Y$  is employee retention and  $X_1$  to  $X_4$  are career development, job promotion, remuneration and employee recognition. Moderation was tested by adding hotel rating ( $Z$ ) and the interaction terms  $X_iZ$  in a second step. Normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov  $p = .089$ ; Shapiro-Wilk  $p = .074$ ), multicollinearity (VIF 2.427–2.667), homoscedasticity (Breusch-Pagan  $p > .05$ ) [36], independence of residuals (Durbin-Watson = 1.89) [37] and linearity (Ramsey RESET  $p > .05$ ) were all satisfied.

### 5. Results and Discussion

#### 5.1 Response rate and respondent profile

Of the 152 questionnaires distributed, 142 were returned and usable, a response rate of 93.42%, which exceeds the 70% considered very good for survey research [38]. Respondents were predominantly aged 25–44 years (70.4%), 54.9% were male and 43.0% female, and 49.3% held a bachelor's or master's degree. More than half (57.0%) were on contract or temporary terms, an important context given that job security is itself a component of retention.

#### 5.2 Descriptive statistics

All constructs were rated in the moderate band (Figure 2). Hotel rating ( $M = 3.29$ ) and recognition ( $M = 3.25$ ) received the highest scores, and remuneration the lowest ( $M = 2.88$ ). Within career development, performance feedback ( $M = 3.35$ ) and training ( $M = 3.32$ ) were the strongest items, whereas clarity of career progression paths was the weakest ( $M = 2.75$ ). Promotion was valued as a motivator ( $M = 3.23$ ) but rated poorly on fairness ( $M = 2.67$ ) and frequency ( $M = 2.72$ ). Salaries were paid on time ( $M = 3.58$ ), yet regular salary reviews ( $M = 2.64$ ) and competitiveness ( $M = 2.79$ ) were rated low. The feeling of being valued when recognised scored highest of all items ( $M = 3.63$ ), while public celebration of achievements was the weakest recognition item ( $M = 2.99$ ). Retention itself was moderate ( $M = 3.03$ ), and 47.2% of respondents disagreed that they rarely consider jobs elsewhere.

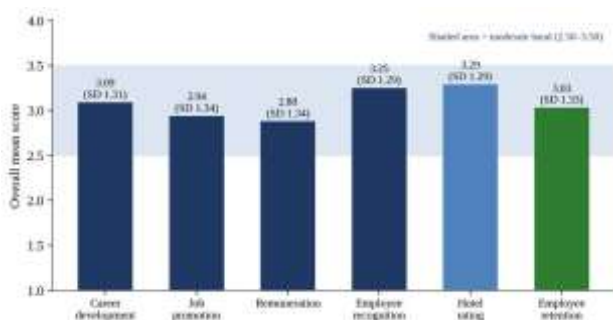


Figure 2: Overall mean scores of the study variables ( $N = 142$ ).

#### 5.3 Correlation and regression results

All four practices correlated positively and significantly with retention: recognition ( $r = .648$ ), remuneration ( $r = .587$ ), career development ( $r = .542$ ) and job promotion ( $r = .528$ ), all  $p < .01$ .

Hotel rating also correlated with retention ( $r = .512$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the direct effects model (Table 1), the four practices explained 50.7% of the variance in retention (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.493$ ;  $F = 35.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Recognition was the strongest predictor, followed by remuneration, while career development and job promotion were not significant once the other practices were controlled for (Figure 3).

Table 1: Regression coefficients for employee retention

| Predictor                    | B     | SE    | $\beta$ | t     | p     |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|---------|-------|-------|
| Constant                     | 0.524 | 0.142 | –       | 3.690 | <.001 |
| Career development           | 0.117 | 0.079 | 0.128   | 1.481 | .142  |
| Job promotion                | 0.083 | 0.094 | 0.089   | 0.883 | .377  |
| Remuneration                 | 0.323 | 0.081 | 0.341   | 3.988 | <.001 |
| Employee recognition         | 0.439 | 0.076 | 0.462   | 5.776 | <.001 |
| Recognition $\times$ rating* | 0.099 | 0.049 | 0.104   | 2.020 | .045  |

$R^2 = 0.507$  (direct model); 0.560 (moderated model). \*Interaction from the moderated model.

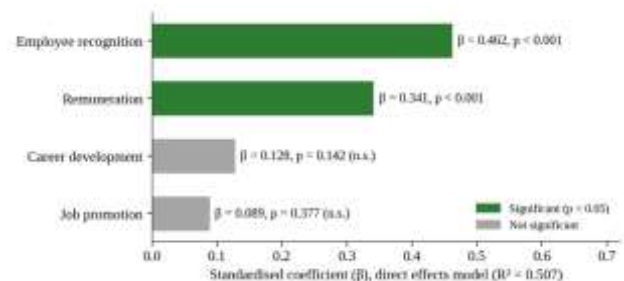


Figure 3: Standardised regression coefficients in the direct effects model.

#### 5.4 Moderating effect of hotel rating

Adding hotel rating and the interaction terms raised the explained variance to 56.0% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.053$ ,  $F$  change = 4.12,  $p = .044$ ). Only the recognition  $\times$  hotel rating interaction was significant ( $B = 0.099$ ,  $\beta = 0.104$ ,  $t = 2.020$ ,  $p = .045$ ); the interactions with career development ( $p = .412$ ), job promotion ( $p = .475$ ) and remuneration ( $p = .290$ ) were not, and the main effect of hotel rating was not significant ( $p = .212$ ). As Figure 4 shows, recognition is associated with a steeper rise in retention in higher-rated hotels. Table 2 summarises the hypothesis tests.

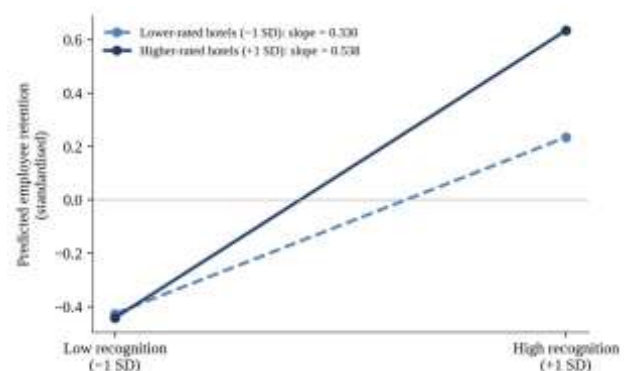


Figure 4: Moderating effect of hotel rating on the recognition-retention relationship ( $\pm 1$  SD).

Table 2: Summary of hypothesis testing

| Hypothesis                                                 | $\beta$ | p    | Decision     |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---------|------|--------------|
| H <sub>01</sub> Career development $\rightarrow$ retention | 0.128   | .142 | Not rejected |

| Hypothesis                                | $\beta$ | p     | Decision     |
|-------------------------------------------|---------|-------|--------------|
| H <sub>02</sub> Job promotion → retention | 0.089   | .377  | Not rejected |
| H <sub>03</sub> Remuneration → retention  | 0.341   | <.001 | Rejected     |
| H <sub>04</sub> Recognition → retention   | 0.462   | <.001 | Rejected     |
| H <sub>05</sub> Hotel rating moderates    | 0.104   | .045  | Rejected     |

### 5.5 Discussion

The prominence of recognition agrees with evidence that recognition lowers turnover intention in Kenya's hospitality industry [23] and with Self-Determination Theory, under which recognition satisfies the needs for relatedness and competence that sustain commitment [28]. The descriptive results suggest that recognition in these hotels rests largely on informal appreciation by managers rather than structured programmes, which indicates scope to strengthen it further. The significance of remuneration is consistent with studies linking compensation to lower turnover intention [20], [21], and the low ratings for salary reviews and competitiveness suggest that pay is a binding constraint in Nakuru County. Since rating did not moderate the remuneration effect, competitive pay appears to be a retention requirement in every category of hotel.

The non-significance of career development and promotion contrasts with Nairobi studies that reported positive relationships [14], [17], but it is consistent with the observation that career intentions do not necessarily translate into retention [16]. In Ability-Motivation-Opportunity terms, an opportunity that employees perceive as unfair or unavailable does little to retain them [30]; the low ratings for promotion fairness and for clarity of progression paths provide a plausible explanation. Finally, the moderation result indicates that hotel rating is not a direct driver of retention but a contextual factor that amplifies recognition, in line with evidence that contextual variables moderate reward-outcome relationships in Kenyan star-rated hotels [26]. Higher-rated hotels may operate more formal recognition systems, or their employees may value recognition more; lower-rated hotels cannot rely on this amplifying effect.

### 6. Conclusion

This study examined how four reward management practices relate to employee retention in star-rated hotels in Nakuru County, Kenya, and whether hotel rating moderates these relationships. Remuneration and employee recognition significantly predicted retention, with recognition the strongest predictor, while career development and job promotion, as currently practised, did not predict retention independently. Hotel rating moderated only the recognition-retention relationship, strengthening the effect of recognition in higher-rated hotels.

The study contributes theoretically by combining the Job Demands-Resources, Self-Determination and Ability-Motivation-Opportunity theories in a single model and by showing that hotel classification acts as a contextual amplifier rather than a direct predictor of retention. Empirically, it provides the first evidence on reward practices and retention in Nakuru County's classified hotels. For practice, hotels should benchmark salaries annually and review pay that falls below the market, formalise recognition through written policies, dedicated budgets and supervisor training, and adopt transparent, merit-based promotion procedures with documented career paths. Lower-rated hotels in particular should invest deliberately in recognition. The Tourism Regulatory Authority could consider including recognition and career development standards among its classification criteria.

### 7. Future Scope

The findings are subject to several limitations. The data were cross-sectional and self-reported by departmental heads, so causal conclusions cannot be drawn and the views of junior staff are not represented. Respondents from the same hotel may not be fully independent, which multilevel models could address. The study was confined to one county, and 44% of the variance in retention remained unexplained. Future research should examine additional predictors such as work-life balance, leadership and organisational culture; test other moderators such as hotel size and ownership; extend the analysis to other counties and to non-supervisory employees; and use longitudinal designs that track actual turnover rather than retention perceptions.

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## Author Profile

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Ronald Chepkilot and Daisy Jeptepkeny Bowen are members of academic staff in the School of Business and Economics, Kabarak University. They supervised the study's design, methodology and analysis and reviewed the manuscript for intellectual content.