

# Retention Practices in the Hospitality Industry: A Portuguese Exploratory Study

Martins, Dora<sup>1</sup>[0000-0002-2474-5483], Borges, Débora<sup>2</sup> and Silva, Susana<sup>3</sup> [0000-0003-4760-7662]

<sup>1</sup> CEOS.PP, ISCAP, Polytechnic of Porto and GOVCOPP, University of Aveiro

<sup>2</sup> ISLA

<sup>3</sup> CEOS.PP, CiTUR, ESHT, Polytechnic of Porto

doramartins@iscap.ipp.pt  
deboraborges1999@hotmail.com  
susanasilva@esht.ipp.pt

## Abstract.

**Abstract.** The recent developments in the hospitality industry and the overall economy following the recent pandemic, demonstrate a need for a new examination of how job seekers perceive hospitality jobs. The hospitality industry plays a major role in the Portuguese economy, contributing greatly to employability in Portugal. One of the recent concerns associated with this factor is directly linked to talent retention. This study seeks to characterise talent retention in hotel units located in the Greater Porto region, one of Portugal's main tourist regions. Based on a qualitative methodology, using an exploratory study, 10 semi-structured interviews were carried out involving human resources management professionals. The results suggest that professional factors are the determining factors in talent retention, specifically job satisfaction, organisational commitment, leadership and the work environment. This study provides solutions for retention practices, centred on the testimonies of human resources managers, on how to maintain the professional satisfaction of teams and reinforce their desire to remain in the hotel industry and in the current hotel unit. In the last part of the paper, they provide the main conclusions for Human Resources Management, especially related to talent retention practices. This paper also includes the theoretical and practical implications of the findings as well as outlines the limitations and avenues for further research.

**Keywords:** Talent Retention Practices, Tourism Industry, Job Satisfaction, Leadership, Work Environment, Organisational Commitment.

## 1 Introduction

The hospitality sector has a key strategic position in global economic development (Dogru et al., 2024; El-Said et al., 2024; Park et al., 2024; Pu et al., 2024; Ye & Chen, 2024; Yen & Lee, 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). According to data presented by Stocklytics.com, the hotel industry worldwide will grow by 9%, reaching 446.5 billion dollars in 2024 (Publituris Hotelaria, 2024). In one of the latest studies released by CBRE (CBRE, 2024), the "2024 European Hotel Investor Intentions Survey", Portugal emerges as the 7th most attractive country in Europe to invest in hotels, in a ranking led by Spain, demonstrating great potential, both in terms of the diversity of destinations on offer and the quality of service. According to the National Statistics Institute (INE, 2021), the hospitality sector accounted for 15.3% of Portugal's GDP in 2019 and fell by 50.4% in 2020, accounting for just 8% of Portugal's GDP. In 2023, the tourism sector broke records, surpassing pre-pandemic levels in the main demand indicators (+10.0% in overnight stays; +10.7% in guests and +18.9% in tourist receipts). According to INE data (2023), 30.0 million guests were registered, 18.3 million of them foreigners, which represents an increase of 13.3 per cent and 19.1 per cent, respectively, compared to 2022 (INE, 2023). There are more and more initiatives to accelerate the dynamisation of this sector in the national and international economy (Park et al., 2024; Turismo de Portugal, 2024; Yen & Lee, 2024; Pu et al., 2024). This significant presence of the sector in the country is compounded by a number of challenges relating to human resources. One of the biggest challenges is turnover (Liu & Wong, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Pu et al., 2024), so investing in talent retention is a priority (Drogu et al., 2024; Martins & Cruz, 2019). Talents are high-performance professionals who meet the requirements of certain jobs, and companies with good human resources management practices make professionals feel a sense of belonging to their organisations, boosting their development (Martins & Cruz, 2019).

The general objective of this study is to explore the challenges that hotels identify in retaining their employees. More specifically, (1) to explore the strategies used by hotels to ensure employee retention; (2) to explore the factors that hinder employee retention in hotels; and (3) to understand how organisational satisfaction, organisational commitment, the work environment and leadership are related to employee retention.

The next section presents the literature review on the phenomenon of retention in the hospitality sector and the most relevant human resources management practices for retaining talent.

This is followed by a section on the study's methodology, which outlines the procedures used to collect and process the results to help answer the study's objectives. The results obtained are then presented, and finally, the main conclusions, theoretical and practical implications and suggestions for future research are highlighted.

## 2 Literature Review

Attracting and retaining employees in the hospitality sector has been a concern identified in recent literature (e.g. Dogru et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2023; Yen & Lee, 2024). Although it has been recognised as a fast-growing sector of activity since the COVID-19 pandemic (Dogru et al., 2024), it continues to lose employees to competitors in the same and different sectors, and according to Yen and Lee (2024), this loss will continue to account for 1.13 million individuals between 2018 and 2023. This challenge has led human resource management to pay greater attention to attracting and retaining talent (Martins & Cruz, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2023) in order to counteract the shortage of workers in general and talent in particular. This concern tends to be greater in roles where it is more difficult to fill vacancies, especially in positions that are crucial to the business, which requires a diversified human resources strategy capable of guaranteeing job satisfaction and strengthening the organisational commitment of the organisation's talent (Collings et al., 2019). Considering that talent is directly linked to business dynamics and success, Silvério (2017:5) states that "talent management implies, in a first phase, identifying the talent needed and its value in the current and foreseeable context of the company and, in a second phase, triggering the necessary actions to attract new talent, retain and develop existing talent, in order to respond to the demands of the business". This argument is reinforced by Martins and Cruz (2019) who argue that talent management should involve choosing and implementing human resource management practices that are aligned with the expectations and needs of each employee and, as a result, have a positive effect on satisfaction, motivation, organisational commitment and retention (Leitão, 2017; Martins & Cruz, 2019; Zhu et al., 2024). Recent studies (e.g. Callefi et al., 2021; Pu et al., 2024) have shown that the attention of employees begins to shift from the traditional salary and benefits to factors such as working environment, personal development and interpersonal interaction, which are directly or indirectly related to the job satisfaction of employees and organisational commitment. In turn, Dogru and colleagues (2024) show that a good working environment, combined with team spirit, is a retention factor in companies. By working cohesively and focusing on common goals, employees create a greater sense of belonging. Considering that the retention of people is the result of the mutual satisfaction of needs between the employee and their employer (Ye & Chen, 2024; Yen & Lee, 2024; Zhu et al, 2024), the best way to retain talent is to continuously develop them and be efficient in attracting them, i.e. hiring employees who are interested in a long-term commitment and want to develop, while the organisation invests in the continuous development of these employees and in creating a good working environment, which can increase job satisfaction and the desire to retain talent (Chahlal & Poonam, 2017; Pu et al., 2024; Ye & Chen, 2024).

Some literature (e.g. Costa et al., 2021; Martins & Cruz, 2019; Ramalho, 2020) suggests that the most effective retention practices are onboarding programmes, flexible working practices and work-life balance; continuous feedback; job shadowing, an organisational climate that promotes involvement, recruitment and selection, training and development, a competitive rewards system, performance management and the

structuring of an attractive internal career plan. In the specific case of the hotel industry, developing talent (through training and development and career plans) provides hotel units with a qualified workforce with the necessary skills that are reflected in the quality of service (Ferreira, 2013; Vergara & Davel, 2001).

On the one hand, Ramalho (2020) explains that low wages in the hospitality industry can contribute to a cycle of poverty and inequality, as employees may compete to progress or improve their finances. On the other hand, Dogru and colleagues (2024) say that in the hospitality industry's labour market, where increasing wages not only addresses financial concerns but also contributes to mitigating other barriers to entry and retention. In addition, the sector also has a low prospect of career progression. Thus, Lamelas (2019) states that career development in the sector is associated with low salaries and low notoriety. According to Borges (2022), the lack of growth opportunities within the company is a relevant factor, since leadership positions are often filled by veteran employees or by people who joined the company through internal promotions, thus limiting opportunities for new employees. Lamelas (2019) also points to the lack of transparency in the promotion process, i.e. if the promotion criteria are not clear and fair, employees may feel demotivated to seek growth opportunities. For this reason, an organisational culture that doesn't value internal promotion or that doesn't prioritise career development can contribute to a negative perception of career progression and, in the near future, trigger the employee's intention to leave. Increasingly, research into employee retention (Hashim et al., 2022; Ye & Chen, 2024; Yen & Lee, 2024; Zhu et al., 2024) points to the need for a balance between personal and professional life as a determining factor in the commitment and permanence of talent in organisations. Organisational commitment represents a psychological state that characterises the relationship the employee has with the organisation, as well as its implication in the employee's decision to remain part of the organisation (Mayer & Allen, 1991, cited by Borges, 2023). Silvério (2017) explains that the affective component of organisational commitment is related to the feeling of belonging, i.e. employees with strong affective commitment stay with the organisation because they want to. This involvement presupposes identification with the organisation since the employee is strongly attached to it, and this is the dimension most directly linked to retention.

More recently, Ye and Chen (2024), based on Schaufeli and colleagues (2002), say that "work engagement has been defined as a positive, fulfilling work-related psychological state that encompasses vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour refers to having plentiful energy and exceptional endurance and being willing to put in the requisite effort for work; dedication refers to being passionately invested in work and being proud of it; and absorption refers to being fully engaged with work to the extent that one loses track of time" (Ye & Chen, 2024).

Recent hospitality studies (e.g. Liang & Chang, 2017; Ye & Chen, 2024; Yen & Lee, 2024) have established antecedents of work engagement, namely transformational leadership and Zhu and colleagues (2024) believe that it would be possible for managers to boost hospitality employees' career commitment by enhancing their emotional attachment to an organisation. This type of leadership is the one that most

influences and conditions the emotional contagion of a team by establishing common emotions, attracting talented people for the pleasure of working together, constituting a fundamental way of retaining talent (Martins & Cruz, 2019; Borges, 2023). In this way, it can be said that the leader tends to play a decisive role in keeping employees in organisations, regardless of working conditions. There are some measures that the leader can implement with a view to retaining talent (Cappelli, 2000): (1) use attractive compensation mechanisms; (2) design attractive/motivating jobs; (3) adjust jobs to employees' motivations, interests and values; (4) co-operate with competitors by giving up or exchanging employees; (5) face high turnover naturally and try to mitigate its effects, or even take advantage of its potential; and, (6) create social ties between employees so that they develop strong embeddedness.

### **3 Methodology**

This qualitative study aims to characterise talent retention in hotel units. To achieve this main objective a semi-structured was used.

The semi-structured interview had a set of demographic questions such as age, gender, academic status, or professional experience to characterise our participants and 15 questions to achieve our objectives. The interview had questions such as “What practices are implemented in the hotel to promote employee retention?”, “What do you think about the retention practices?”, “What integration practices are implemented for employee retention?”, or “What is your motivation to remain in the hotel?”.

The participants in this study were 10 employees from 4-star hotels, six male and four female. Six had ages between 20 and 29 years old. Regarding their academic status, five had professional courses, and three were undergraduates mainly in the tourism field. Regarding their professional status, five were receptionists, and all of them worked in hospitality at least for five years. All the hotels were small or medium-size enterprises.

To conduct the study, several hospitality employees were reached via LinkedIn explaining the study's aims. All the interviews were performed online and audiotaped. After verbatim transcription, data were analysed according to content analysis procedures (Bardin, 2011). All ethical considerations were taken during this study.

### **4 Results**

To characterize the retention practices in hotel units emerged a main category: Human Resources Management Practices.

This category refers to all kinds of strategies that are used by hotel units to promote employee retention, namely Integration Practices, Training, Career Management, Social Benefits, and Work-Life Balance Practices.

The category Integration Practices refers to the strategies used by hotels to introduce new employees to the organisation and the team and to the fact that the new employee is accompanied by someone more experienced in the job as illustrated by *"As soon as I entered, I was introduced to the hotel, that is, the space, and I visited the various areas. where I was also introduced to get to know the team better. I was also immediately added to a general WhatsApp group and introduced to my colleagues who made up the front desk, which was the post I was hired for, and from then on I always felt at ease with any questions. Then I was made aware of the main internal rules and processes. I remember that for the first week, I was accompanied by a colleague at the reception desk, who showed me reception, and showed me how everything worked, the booking program and, in general, everything I had to do on a day-to-day basis I did under his supervision"* (I3).

Training refers to the company's concern to provide continuous training, enabling the acquisition of new skills to improve the quality of the service provided and to develop professional and personal aspects as observed in the words of Participant 1 *"Professional development practices are very important for safety in the tasks, updating knowledge and managing costs. Although there are some basic annual training courses in the company, they are very much geared towards contact with the customer (for example, English classes for employees who have this gap and who need to deal with the customer directly)"*.

The category Career Management refers to the development opportunities inside the hotel. The majority of the participants (n=8) revealed the lack of opportunities in the sector and in their hotel as illustrated by "older" employees, who have been with the hotel since it opened and are the ones who have the greatest opportunities to achieve big positions, meaning that there are no new opportunities for employees who joined later. In terms of career opportunities, I don't think it's easy to move up in the company, you only go up when there are higher positions available, which, in the case of this company, are all occupied by older employees, who have been here for many years and so there is a lack of opportunity" (I5). On the other hand, despite recognising the lack of opportunities, two participants were promoted as stated *"That led to my promotion to head of reception, which gave me more responsibilities and made me more satisfied, there is always goodwill from the bosses when it comes to taking on other senior positions, but of course, you cannot reach everyone because there are and few opportunities, there ends up being little growth"* (I4).

Social Benefits refer to the kind of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards used by the hotels to promote satisfaction and retention of employees. Six participants referred to the emotional salary as a very important and motivating strategy as illustrated by *"The emotional salary without a doubt. I am not going to be a hypocrite and say that money does not matter because it does, but since I do not get a big salary here, I think it is the other, more immaterial factors that motivate me"* (I7). Other intrinsic benefits were mentioned such as recognition, encouraging self-realisation, personal development, promoting active participation in the organization, and employee autonomy. The extrinsic benefits most valued by the participants were the salary increase, effective employment contracts, combined with greater safety at work, a good working

environment, social benefits, and better working conditions, as stated *“it is crucial to increase the salary, but also to have more safety, and better conditions”* (I 1).

Work-Life Balance Practices refers to the strategies used to combine work and family responsibilities. All the participants recognised the importance of these practices but the only practice referred to was schedule flexibility as illustrated by *“the hotel is very flexible in terms of working hours whenever we need to change our schedule, we are given this opportunity, despite working shifts, which is less favourable, we always have the timetable a month in advance, and there are no changes only if there are any unforeseen circumstances, and this makes it easier to organise our lives”* (I 10).

## 5 Discussion

As far as new employee integration practices are concerned, the results show that onboarding programmes are structured to provide the essential bases and tools for employees to be able to perform their duties successfully. Among the most common onboarding practices in the hotels studied are the presentation of the hotel and the team, as well as the accompaniment of the new employee by someone more experienced in the job, facilitating their organisational integration. These onboarding initiatives tend to be considered appropriate, as they reinforce the motivation and sense of belonging of new employees (Martins & Cruz, 2019; Zhu et al., 2024), facilitating retention after the onboarding period. This human resource management practice tends to be more effective when the hotel offers an initial training and skills development programme to ensure the effective performance of the new employee. A variety of literature (Martins & Cruz, 2019) suggests that a job shadowing training strategy is effective for the performance of tasks, enabling the new employee to be constantly monitored by someone more experienced in the job, providing a quick overview of the job and the day-to-day work, so that it is easier to carry it out autonomously (Martins & Cruz, 2019). This concern was evidenced by the majority of participants in this study, who recognise that training practices are a concern for their organisations, with a view to giving employees opportunities to increase their knowledge, acquire new skills, develop existing competencies and even mould employee behaviour to the organisational culture and improve the quality of the service provided (Ferreira, 2013; Vergara & Davel, 2013). However, the results suggest that in some hotel units the value of training practices for the professional development of employees tends to be neglected, even though there is a real conviction of their importance for the quality of the service provided in an increasingly competitive market (Ramalho, 2020; Yen & Lee, 2024).

Regarding to career management and development practices, the results show that the majority of participants have never had opportunities for professional progression in the hotel unit where they work, negatively influencing their motivation and satisfaction. These results are in line with Lamelas (2019) and Ramalho (2020) when they argue that low career progression prospects are also associated with low salaries, which end up causing interpersonal conflicts and competitiveness between colleagues

and, for these reasons, employees are less interested in staying in organisations whose organisational culture does not value internal promotion or structure career development plans (Baum, 2019; Lamelas, 2019; Martins & Cruz, 2019; Ramalho, 2020; Zhu et al., 2024). The results of this study also reveal that the participants' hotel units do not structure short- and long-term career objectives. This empirical evidence reinforces the arguments in the literature (Dogru et al., 2024; Ye & Chen, 2024; Yen & Lee, 2024; Zhu et al., 2024), which concludes that there is a need to define career objectives that help define training and skills development plans for employees in order to guide their careers in the long term and make the desire for retention attractive. Some of the participants also stressed that older employees are the ones who have the greatest chance of taking on higher positions and that sometimes the low qualifications of older employees in the organisation can be associated with this lack of progression opportunities. These results tend to be in line with the arguments of Baum (2019) who concludes that many leadership positions are held by senior but poorly qualified employees, making it difficult for the remaining employees to have opportunities, especially the more talented and better performing ones who, alternatively, choose to leave the organisation (Martins & Cruz, 2019; Yen & Lee, 2024).

Regarding to performance recognition practices, the participants assume that the main form of recognition they see in their hotels is continuous feedback. The results show that continuous feedback is part of the participants' day-to-day lives, strongly linked to performance appraisal practices, monetary rewards and social benefits. This feedback is received by both managers and colleagues and ends up having a positive impact on their motivation and subsequent performance. It also contributes to creating a more productive working environment, as it is given in a constructive and individualised way, highlighting employees' achievements and providing specific guidelines for improving professional performance. This result confirms previous evidence (Armbrust, 2021; Dogru et al., 2024; Leitão, 2017) that the practice of continuous feedback allows employees to feel more involved and have opportunities to contribute their ideas and suggestions and, on the other hand, contributes to adjusting employee performance more immediately and in line with the organisation's purpose. Continuous feedback also has a positive impact on the practice of training and skills development, making it possible to align training and development needs according to the requirements of the job (Armbrust, 2021; Yen & Lee, 2024).

As far as the hotel units' reward practices are concerned, the majority tend to index rewards to performance, while this study reveals that the participants are involved in recognition programmes implemented by their hotel units. Rather than promotions, the predominant practice is to award prizes to employees who achieve or exceed the desired performance. This type of practice encourages high performance and the creation of a positive working environment where employees feel valued, reinforcing their desire to be retained (Dau, 2021; Dumitrascu et al. 2020; Martins & Cruz, 2019). Regarding to work-life balance, the results show that employees feel that the balance between their personal and professional lives is only achieved through flexible working hours which, in a way, already has a positive influence on retention and productivity (Dogru et al., 2024; Hashim et al., 2022; Zumrah et al., 2022). As the main factors

promoting flexibility, employees reported that it was easier to change schedules between colleagues and that managers responded favourably and in advance to changes in schedules, allowing employees to organise and plan their personal lives in advance and avoiding overtime so as not to overburden employees. Work-life balance allows employees to feel more involved in their work and their personal and professional responsibilities, reducing stress and improving their quality of life in general. The results suggest that the implementation of flexibility policies in organisations contributes to increased satisfaction among employees who, by having their needs for flexible working hours met, increase productivity, loyalty and talent retention (Hashim et al., 2022; Yen & Lee, 2024; Pu et al., 2024; Zumrah et al., 2022). On the other hand, the results confirm that the lack of flexible working hours tends to lead employees to consider that they don't have a work-life balance, perceiving that their organisation affects their personal life and, as a result, their desire to stay decreases (Armbrust, 2021; Chahlal & Poonam, 2017; Martins & Cruz, 2019; Pu et al., 2024).

If an organisation doesn't offer an environment that promotes professional growth, with opportunities for promotion, training and continuous development and competitive pay that is aligned with employees' skills and experience, it is possible that employees will feel unhappy and not feel part of the organisation, putting their permanence in the company at risk (Almonani et al., 2022; Dau, 2021). This work-life balance practice, according to the results of this study, reinforces the idea that organisations take care of employees' personal and family needs (Garcia, 2022; Hashim et al., 2022; Ramalho, 2020; Zumrah et al., 2022).

## 6 Conclusions

The results of the study lead us to conclude that the main challenges for retaining talent in hotel units centre mainly on the desire for a salary above the national minimum, the existence of social benefits, opportunities for career progression, training and development opportunities, a pleasant working environment, recognition and the guarantee of professional stability. Another human resources management practice that is highly relevant to employee retention in hotel units is related to work-life balance. According to the participants, this balance is achieved through flexible working hours, which allow time for family and personal life. We can, therefore, conclude that these HR management practices are the key factors for retaining talent in the organisations involved in this study.

Despite the research findings offering valuable insights for subsequent researchers, there are still some limitations. One of the limitations encountered was the scarcity of specific literature on the subject in the hotel sector, given that it is a sector with very specific challenges in terms of human resources management. Another condition of the study was the small number of participants. It is suggested that in future studies, a larger number of participants and the adoption of a quantitative or mixed methodology could extract more robust data that would allow the results obtained to be generalised. Another limitation of the study relates to the qualifications of most of the

participants. Most of the participants only have low qualifications, which could influence the generality of the results regarding the level of talent retention. Another limitation to consider is the predominance of participants aged between 20 and 29, corresponding to just one age generation, Generation Y. Future studies could explore age as a moderating or mediating factor in greater or lesser retention, diversifying the age profile of the participants or, for example, future research could adopt a longitudinal design to understand how this perception of whether or not employees want to be retained changes as they get older. It would be interesting to see how the challenge of retention in the hospitality sector is experienced at an international level because, as well as helping to improve talent retention in organisations, it could help to assess how it can promote global development and innovation in talent management in the sector. Thus, additional research is required to generalize the findings in different and or diverse hospitality contexts.

Finally, as this is an exploratory study, we believe that the results could inspire other researchers interested in the subject and, in this way, enrich the contributions to theory and the implications for the practice of human resource management in hotel units. Our work is an important insight that contributes to the academic debate by suggesting that the hotel sector has difficulties in retaining workers and is one of the sectors most at risk of losing workers to other sectors. As this is a sector of activity whose labour market is more dynamic, we have also contributed implications for practice, especially among employers and human resources managers in world regions where labour supply is scarcer and wage levels less competitive, as seems to be the case in Portugal.

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