

Determinants of kitchen staff turnover in Cape Town central business district restaurants: A quantitative study

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Orientation: The South African hospitality industry is highly dependent on skilled kitchen staff, yet it continues to experience persistent turnover that disrupts operational efficiency, service quality, and profitability. Although turnover in hotels has been the subject of international research, there is little empirical data specifically addressing restaurant kitchens in Africa.

Research purpose: This study aimed to examine the extent, determinants, and consequences of kitchen staff turnover in restaurants located in Cape Town's Central Business District (CBD).

Motivation for the study: Employee retention in restaurant kitchens remains a critical human resource management challenge. The absence of context-specific empirical data limits the development of effective retention strategies in the South African hospitality sector.

Research approach/design and method: A quantitative, correlational research design was adopted. Data were collected from 100 kitchen employees selected through systematic and convenience sampling across CBD restaurants. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (v26), employing descriptive and inferential statistics.

Main findings: Low pay, long working hours, poor working conditions, and limited career advancement opportunities were identified as key drivers of turnover, with significant differences observed across age and qualification levels.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings offer evidence-based insights for restaurant managers and policymakers to design targeted interventions focusing on fair compensation, workload management, and career progression to improve employee retention.

Contribution/value-add: Anchored in Job Embeddedness and Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene theories, the study contributes empirical evidence to the underexplored context of restaurant kitchens in South Africa and incorporates best practice models to enhance workforce stability within the hospitality industry.

Keywords: staff turnover; kitchen employees; restaurant; Cape Town; hospitality; job embeddedness; motivation-hygiene theory; quantitative research.

Introduction

Employee turnover is a critical concern for the hospitality sector globally, with the highest rates of churn found in kitchen departments. Employee departures undermine service quality, increase recruitment and training costs, and erode organisational knowledge. In South Africa's restaurant sector, kitchen staff turnover remains particularly acute, yet there is limited empirical analysis of its causes and solutions in local contexts.

Globally, most research on hospitality turnover has focused on hotels in Europe, North America, and Asia, highlighting issues such as low pay, long unsocial hours, and poor career progression (Deery & Jago, 2015; Giousmpasoglou, 2024; Mohsin et al., 2015). In Africa, specifically in South Africa, further research is needed to examine and address the unique challenges of restaurant kitchen environments (Khavari et al., 2023; Madanaguli et al., 2022; Ntwakumba, 2022; Stemele, 2025). The present study responds to this gap by examining the drivers, patterns, and impacts of kitchen staff turnover in Cape Town's Central Business District (CBD), using a robust quantitative approach and integrating leading theoretical and empirical models.

Literature review

Turnover in the global hospitality sector

Employee turnover has long been recognised as a pervasive and costly challenge in the global hospitality industry (Deery & Jago, 2015; Ghani et al., 2022). While all sectors experience some degree of workforce churn, hospitality, especially the restaurant and hotel sub-sectors, consistently reports turnover rates far exceeding those in retail, manufacturing, or professional services (Bureau of Labour Statistics SA, 2022). The financial impact is profound: Bryant and Allen (2013) estimated that the cost of replacing a single frontline hospitality employee can range from 25% to over 100% of their annual salary, once recruitment, training, lost productivity, and diminished service quality are considered.

Numerous studies have identified patterns of factors contributing to high turnover in hospitality, including inadequate compensation, long and irregular working hours, job dissatisfaction, and limited opportunities for advancement (Abrams & Gebeloff, 2017; Boella & Goss-Turner, 2019; Stemele, 2025). Additional drivers include poor work-life balance, unsupportive supervisory relationships, and stressful working conditions, all of which are exacerbated by the industry's demand for flexible, customer-facing labour (Deery & Jago, 2015; Machado et al., 2021). The cyclical nature of demand in hospitality, characterised by seasonal peaks and troughs, further contributes to employment instability and worker dissatisfaction (Mohsin et al., 2015).

Innovative research by Mohsin et al. (2015) challenges the industry's reliance on linear thinking about turnover. Their study of luxury hotel staff in India demonstrated that the relationship between key antecedents (job security, organisational enthusiasm, stimulating work, and loyalty) and intention to leave is not always straightforward. Their findings – supported by the theoretical framework of Pierce and Aguinis's (2013) 'too-much-of-a-good-thing' effect – demonstrated that over-investment in individual retention strategies (e.g. overly generous pay, excessive job security, or hyperactive reward schemes) may not yield a corresponding reduction in turnover. Instead, certain factors exhibit quadratic (curvilinear) relationships with turnover intentions: both extremely high and extremely low levels of a positive antecedent may increase the propensity to leave, while moderate levels optimise retention. This challenges managers to adopt a balanced, holistic approach to workforce management, rather than seeking a 'magic bullet'.

Another dimension of global research addresses the impact of organisational culture and leadership style. Studies highlight that transformational and servant leadership can foster greater job embeddedness and loyalty, while autocratic or transactional leadership correlates with higher turnover (Deery & Jago, 2015; Wiyono et al., 2024). The importance of workplace climate, fairness, and perceived organisational support is consistently emphasised, showing that employees

are more likely to remain with organisations where they feel valued and supported (Holston-Okae, 2017; Karatepe, 2013).

Turnover in African and South African hospitality

Despite the global attention to hospitality turnover, African contexts, especially sub-Saharan Africa, remain under-researched (Deri et al., 2021). The South African hospitality industry is uniquely shaped by its socio-economic landscape, characterised by high unemployment, skills shortages, and a legacy of informal employment and income inequality (Welter, 2012). In this environment, restaurants and hotels face persistent difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled kitchen staff, with turnover rates that rival or exceed those seen internationally.

Local studies confirm that compensation remains the leading cause of turnover but highlight additional context-specific drivers, including limited access to structured training, absence of formal career pathways, and weak labour protections (Deri et al., 2021; Monyaki et al., 2022). In many establishments, especially smaller or independently owned restaurants, kitchen staff are hired on a casual or part-time basis, often without written contracts or benefits (Nel & Werner, 2017). This informality exacerbates job insecurity and reduces workers' commitment to their employers.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these challenges. Monyaki et al. (2022) and Ghazali et al. (2023) found that health risks, fluctuating business closures, and the erosion of job security led to a spike in resignations, absenteeism, and 'presenteeism' (working while unwell). This not only increased costs for employers but also negatively affected team morale and service quality.

Turnover in South Africa has direct operational and financial consequences, including disruption to service continuity, increased training costs, and erosion of organisational culture (Bryant & Allen, 2013; Ndatshe et al., 2024; Sithomola & Maluleke, 2024; Welter, 2012). It is therefore essential to differentiate among the classifications of kitchen personnel. Supervisors and chefs are generally staff members who acquire substantial organisational memory through previous experience and familiarity with established routines, whereas lower-tier positions, such as assistants in the kitchen, sanitary workers, and dishwashers, are frequently hired on a part-time or full-time basis, limiting the development of comparable institutional knowledge.

Employee well-being in the hospitality industry

Alagöz et al. (2025) and Alhammadi (2025) contend that emotional labour, especially in customer-facing and culinary settings, exacerbates workplace stress and heightens turnover intentions. This is pertinent to the current investigation, as numerous kitchen personnel frequently operate under high-pressure circumstances that necessitate emotional management with minimal assistance. Burnout and

resignations are further increased by poor psychological well-being, inadequate sleep, and understaffing (Williams, 2021), which is consistent with trends seen in South African kitchens. Post-COVID-19 studies indicate heightened anxiety and fatigue among hospitality employees, rendering mental health a significant determinant of turnover (Bhuiyan et al., 2024; Elshaer et al., 2023). Numerous institutions continue to be devoid of mental health programmes or workload-balancing systems (Krishnan & Rathakrishnan, 2025). These studies collectively establish a robust theoretical framework for the present analysis by demonstrating how emotional labour, diminished well-being, and post-pandemic stress persist in influencing turnover. Consequently, this study aims to evaluate the well-being characteristics that affect turnover among kitchen personnel in Cape Town restaurants.

Influence of technology innovation on labour stability

Recent research indicates that technology adoption is progressively influencing workforce experiences in the restaurant sector, presenting both possibilities and concerns pertinent to the current study's emphasis. Willim et al. (20024) and Parker and Grote (2022) observed that automation and computerised ordering systems might alleviate workload pressures; yet, the same technologies may concurrently instigate concerns of job displacement, thereby affecting individuals' motivations to leave their positions. In accordance with this complexity, numerous scholars contend that technology can augment job satisfaction when accompanied by adequate training, capacity development, and employee involvement in the process of implementation (Abolnasser et al., 2023; Birdir & Sahilli, 2024; Bonfanti et al., 2025; Deng et al., 2023), which closely aligns with this study's focus on employee preparedness and organisational support as factors influencing technology acceptance.

Similarly, Alt (2021) emphasises that restaurants utilising digital scheduling solutions get enhanced communication and more equal shift distribution, resulting in reduced turnover rates. The findings underscore the significance of perceived equity and enhanced work procedures, which this study also investigates as potential mediators between technology advancements and staff retention. Moriuchi and Murdy (2024) and Meng et al. (2025) assert that the implementation of robotics in full-service restaurants may elevate stress among staff members, as workers experience pressure to match the pace of automated systems, thus raising turnover intentions. Nizarali (2023) and Amissah et al. (2022) note that digital monitoring of performance devices contributes to stress among kitchen staff due to perpetual surveillance, which diminishes job satisfaction and increases resignation rates. This is directly pertinent to this study's investigation of the psychological effects of emerging technologies.

Furthermore, Aamir et al. (2025) and Lock (2020) illustrated that small and medium-sized restaurants implement cost-effective, supportive technologies,

resulting in enhanced workflows for employees and fewer interpersonal problems, hence decreasing turnover rates. Thus, this indicates that the nature of the technology used and the context of its implementation significantly influence employee outcomes.

Employee development and human resource strategies in hospitality

Hassanein and Özgüt (2022) and Alhajaj and Ahmad (2024) observed that organised human resource management (HRM) systems incorporating skills development, mentoring, and performance feedback are crucial in mitigating turnover. However, HRM procedures tend to be insufficient or uneven in the hospitality industry, particularly in small, independently managed eateries. The absence of structure diminishes motivation among kitchen personnel, who frequently seek advancement but encounter limited prospects for progression (Cornell et al., 2024). Recent studies underscore this issue: structured onboarding and ongoing training programmes in restaurants greatly enhance employee retention, especially among junior kitchen staff (Gustafson, 2023). Way et al. (2025) illustrated that mentorship and organised career trajectories enhance job satisfaction and organisational commitment in high-pressure restaurant settings, underscoring the significance of HRM policies for employee retention.

Moreover, studies indicate that the presence of apprenticeship programmes and culinary training has a substantial impact on retention rates. Employees who recognise prospects for professional advancement exhibit enhanced organisational commitment (Elizabeth et al., 2025; Mohamad et al., 2025). Nevertheless, South African restaurants often encounter resource limitations that hinder their ability to offer formal training programmes, thereby sustaining elevated turnover rates. These studies corroborate the present research by emphasising that HRM practices, organised training, and career development are essential factors in maintaining the employment of kitchen personnel.

Theoretical frameworks: Motivation-hygiene and job embeddedness

Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory (1959) offers a foundational lens for understanding turnover. According to Herzberg, job satisfaction and dissatisfaction arise from different sets of factors: 'motivators' (intrinsic drivers such as achievement, recognition, and the work itself) and 'hygiene factors' (extrinsic elements like pay, job security, supervision, and working conditions). In hospitality, deficiencies in hygiene factors – low pay, poor conditions, unsocial hours – are often the primary triggers of staff dissatisfaction and voluntary exits (Herzberg et al., 1959; Holston-Okoe, 2017).

In recent decades, research has moved beyond Herzberg's binary model to incorporate more dynamic, integrative frameworks. Job Embeddedness Theory (Yao et al., 2004)

posits that employees' decisions to stay or leave are influenced by three components: 'links' (connections to people and activities at work and in the community), 'fit' (compatibility with the organisation and local environment), and 'sacrifice' (the perceived cost of leaving). This broader model accommodates the complex interplay of economic, relational, and contextual factors that characterise kitchen work in contemporary restaurants.

Karatepe (2013) and Nel and Werner (2017) have shown that job embeddedness is a strong negative predictor of turnover intention in hospitality settings: the more 'embedded' staff feel in their teams, roles, and workplaces, the less likely they are to leave – even in the face of external opportunities. Importantly, job embeddedness can be fostered by supportive leadership, opportunities for professional development, and a strong sense of organisational justice (Chinomona & Dhurup, 2014).

Demographic moderators, equity, and retention strategies

It is now well-established that turnover intentions are not uniform across all employee groups (Table 1). Numerous studies have identified age, tenure, education, and position as critical moderators of turnover (Chinomona & Dhurup, 2014; Takawira et al., 2014). Younger, less-qualified, and short-tenure employees consistently report higher intentions to leave, often citing a lack of upward mobility, insufficient mentoring, or weak organisational identification (Takawira et al., 2014). This is especially pertinent in South African kitchens, where entry-level and junior staff make up the majority of the workforce.

Holston-Okae (2017) stated that in a large-scale study of the hospitality workers of the United States, multifactor HR interventions that simultaneously target compensation, job satisfaction, engagement, and the work environment are far more effective in reducing turnover than isolated initiatives. Similar findings are echoed in African contexts, where upskilling, clear career pathways, and servant leadership have been shown to reduce attrition (Lukose & Agbeyangi, 2024; Wiyono et al., 2024). These studies emphasise the necessity of addressing both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators and of tailoring interventions to the unique needs of different demographic groups.

TABLE 1: Demographic characteristics of kitchen staff ($N = 100$).

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	54
	Female	46
Age (years)	20–29	58
	30–39	25
	≥ 40	17
Qualification	Matric	62
	Post-matric	38
Tenure (years)	< 2	45
	2–5	35
	> 5	20

Source: Ntwakumba, A. (2022). *Staff turnover within restaurant kitchens in Cape Town central business district*. Unpublished master's thesis, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Recent scholarship has also drawn attention to the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion in retention. Employees who perceive fairness in pay, promotion, and workplace treatment are more likely to remain committed and less likely to seek employment elsewhere (Budomo, 2023; Nel & Werner, 2017). In the South African context, this includes not only racial and gender equity but also the professionalisation of kitchen roles, shifting them from informal and precarious work to recognised and respected careers.

Synthesis and research gap

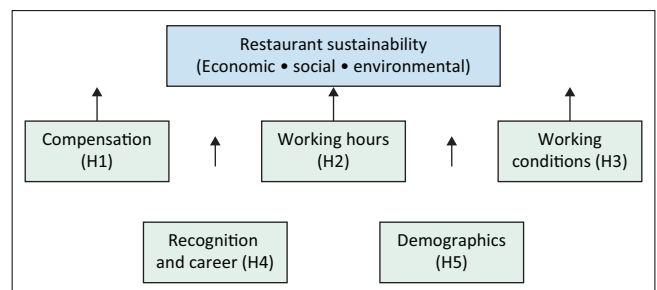
Despite the growing body of international and local research, empirical studies focused specifically on restaurant kitchens in South Africa, using rigorous, inferential analysis, remain scarce. Most existing literature either generalises from the hotel sector or lacks statistical depth, limiting the applicability of its findings to the realities of Cape Town's vibrant, diverse, and highly competitive restaurant sector.

This study addresses the gap by integrating robust quantitative methods, validated theoretical frameworks, and current literature to examine the drivers and moderators of kitchen staff turnover. By situating the research within the broader context of global hospitality trends while foregrounding the unique challenges of the South African setting, the study offers both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for workforce stability in the sector.

Research hypotheses

The hypotheses are illustrated in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1:

- H1:** Employee compensation is significantly associated with staff turnover intention in Cape Town restaurant kitchens.
- H2:** Excessive working hours are positively associated with staff turnover intention.
- H3:** Poor working conditions significantly predict turnover intention among kitchen employees.
- H4:** Lack of recognition and inadequate self-development opportunities are positively associated with turnover intention.
- H5:** Demographic variables (age and qualification) significantly moderate the relationship between workplace factors and turnover intention.



Source: Ntwakumba, A. (2022). *Staff turnover within restaurant kitchens in Cape Town central business district*. Unpublished master's thesis, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework: Kitchen staff turnover and restaurant sustainability.

Research design

A quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design was utilised in this study to rigorously examine the drivers and predictors of kitchen staff turnover in Cape Town restaurants. This approach is well-aligned with the established best practices in hospitality turnover research, as demonstrated by Holston-Okae (2017) and Mohsin et al. (2015), who employed quantitative, inferential statistical methods to elucidate complex multi-variable relationships in the hospitality workforce. The cross-sectional design allowed for the simultaneous measurement of multiple variables and their associations at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of the prevailing turnover dynamics within the sample population.

The study sampling frame comprised restaurants located within Cape Town's CBD, as listed on TripAdvisor (2023), totalling 401 establishments. A sample size calculator was used to determine the number (150) of restaurants to participate in the study. Random sampling was used to select every third restaurant from the TripAdvisor listing until a total of 150 restaurants was achieved, spanning a diversity of cuisine types, restaurant sizes, and ownership models. Of the 150 selected restaurants, 100 participated, yielding a good response rate of 67%, with one kitchen staff member surveyed per restaurant. This sample size is consistent with similar quantitative studies in hospitality research and provides sufficient statistical power for inferential analysis (Deery & Jago, 2015; Holston-Okae, 2017). Each staff member was selected using convenience sampling due to the logistical constraints of variable staff shifts and operational hours. All participants were instructed to answer the survey during non-peak hours (12:00–13:00 and 16:00–17:00) to prevent operational interruptions and enhance response accuracy. The structured questionnaire was disseminated in printed form and promptly returned upon completion to ensure completeness and accuracy. Responses that were partial or incomplete were omitted from the analysis. To guarantee data quality and reliability, each complete questionnaire was verified for accuracy, and captured data were cross-checked twice using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were constructed to analyse the distribution of the outcomes, and outliers were identified and evaluated for validity prior to their participation in inferential analyses.

Instrumentation

The primary data collection instrument was a well-structured, self-administered questionnaire that incorporated validated scales and items from the extant hospitality turnover literature (Deery & Jago, 2015; Holston-Okae, 2017; Mohsin et al., 2015). The instrument was carefully adapted to the South African context through expert review and pilot testing with a small group of kitchen staff to ensure clarity and cultural relevance. Reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency across items and confirming the robustness of the measurement tool.

The questionnaire consisted of four main sections:

- *Demographics*: Age, gender, educational attainment, and tenure in current role.
- *Economic and organisational factors*: Perceptions of compensation, working hours, physical working conditions, opportunities for recognition, and career advancement.
- *Turnover intention*: Standardised items measuring the likelihood of leaving the current job within the next 6 months.
- *Open comments (optional)*: Space for additional qualitative feedback on factors influencing turnover.

All items (except the open comments section) utilised Likert-type response scales to facilitate quantitative analysis and comparability with prior research.

Data collection

Data collection was conducted over a 2-month period, using a mixed-mode approach to optimise response rates and inclusivity. Paper-based questionnaires were distributed during off-peak hours at participating restaurants, with the support of management, while an online version was made available for staff who preferred digital participation or were unavailable during in-person visits. All participants received an information sheet outlining the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were systematically coded and analysed using SPSS version 26, a standard package for social science research. The analytical strategy was designed to describe sample characteristics and test the study hypotheses regarding the relationships among compensation, working hours, working conditions, recognition, advancement, and turnover intention.

Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and standard deviations) were first calculated to provide an overview of respondent demographics and perceptions. Inferential analyses followed, including:

- *Chi-square tests* to assess the association between categorical workplace factors and turnover intention (as visualised in Figure 3).
- *Independent-sample t-tests* to compare mean turnover intention scores across demographic subgroups.
- *Multiple regression analysis* to determine the relative predictive power of compensation, working hours, working conditions, recognition, and advancement, while controlling for demographic variables (see Table 3).

This analytical approach mirrors the robust frameworks used by Mohsin et al. (2015) and Holston-Okae (2017) and provides a rigorous empirical basis for drawing conclusions and making recommendations relevant to hospitality HR policy and practice.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (Ref No. [2019FBREC631]). This study adhered to the ethical standards of the University and the guidelines set forth by the South African National Department of Higher Education and Training for research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, the full research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University.

All participants received detailed information about the purpose and procedures of the study and provided written informed consent before participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time without penalty. No personally identifying information was collected, and all data were anonymised to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Raw data were stored securely and handled only by the research team.

Results

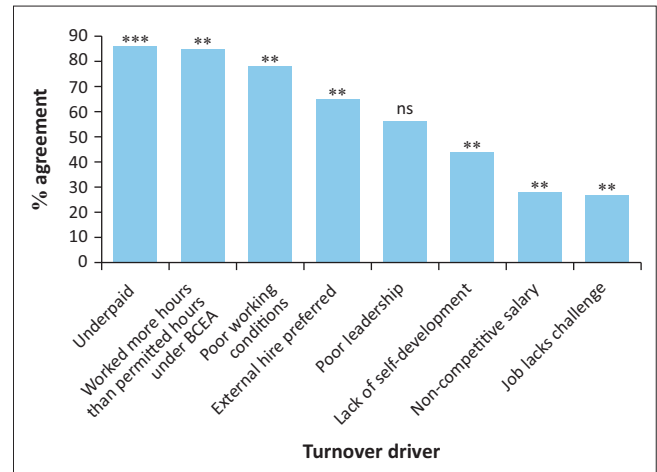
The core quantitative analysis evaluated the association and predictive power of economic and organisational factors on turnover intention.

As shown in Figure 2, the primary turnover drivers were underpayment (86%), excessive working hours (85%), and poor working conditions (78%). Other significant factors included external hiring over internal promotion, poor leadership, and a lack of self-development opportunities.

Discussion

Key findings

As depicted in Figure 2 and summarised in Table 2, the most noticeable drivers of kitchen staff turnover in Cape Town restaurants were low pay (86%), excessive working hours (85%), and poor working conditions (78%). The bar graph in Figure 2 visually demonstrates the predominance of these issues, with underpayment and excessive working hours emerging as the highest-rated turnover factors among respondents. In addition, factors such as external hiring over internal promotion (65%), poor leadership (56%), lack of self-development (44%), and non-competitive pay (28%) also contributed to high levels of turnover intention. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that limiting turnover necessitates more than merely adjusting compensation; restaurants must implement legally compliant and HR-focused strategies, encompassing equitable wage frameworks for each staff category, compliance with restricted working hours, providing safe working conditions, established internal advancement channels, and expenditures on continuing



Source: Ntwakumba, A. (2022). *Staff turnover within restaurant kitchens in Cape Town central business district*. Unpublished master's thesis, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

ns, not significant; BCEA, Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

Note: Bars represent the percentage of participants agreeing with each turnover driver. **, $p < 0.05$; ***, $p < 0.01$.

FIGURE 2: Workplace factors driving turnover intention.

TABLE 2: Inferential analysis: workplace factors and turnover intention.

Turnover driver	% Agreement	χ^2	p-value
Underpaid	86	45.2	< 0.01
Worked more hours than permitted hours under BCEA	85	32.8	< 0.05
Poor working conditions	78	21.4	< 0.05
External hire preferred	65	18.6	< 0.05
Poor leadership	56	12.5	0.08
Lack of self-development	44	10.2	< 0.05
Non-competitive pay	28	5.4	< 0.05
Lack of challenges in the job	27	4.9	< 0.05

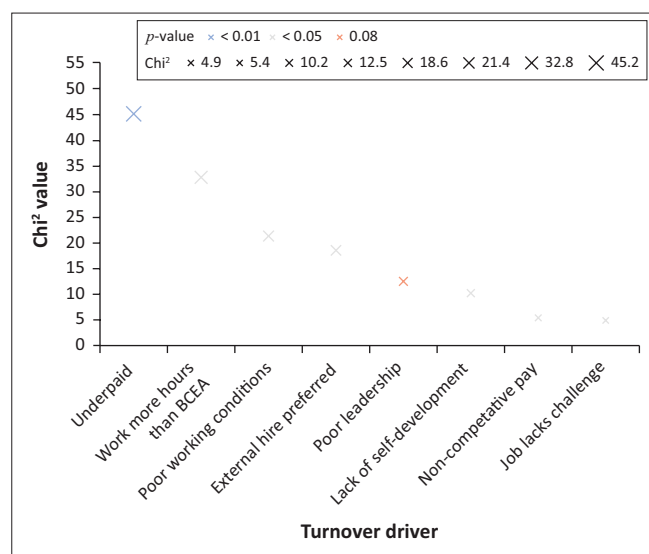
Source: Ntwakumba, A. (2022). *Staff turnover within restaurant kitchens in Cape Town central business district*. Unpublished master's thesis, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

BCEA, Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

skills enhancement. Thus, restaurant managers should align working conditions with Sectoral Determination 14: Hospitality Sector, South Africa and implement planned HR interventions to enhance employee retention and substantially reduce turnover.

The statistical significance of these workplace factors is further illustrated in Figure 3, which maps the Chi-square (χ^2) values for each variable. Here, the largest and most significant effects ($p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$) correspond to underpayment, excessive working hours, and poor working conditions; confirming that these are not only prevalent perceptions but are statistically robust predictors of turnover intention among kitchen staff.

In alignment with international findings (Deery & Jago, 2015; Holston-Okoe, 2017; Mohsin et al., 2015) and African research (Deri et al., 2021; Ghazali et al., 2023), these results underscore the critical role of compensation, workload, and working environment in driving attrition in the hospitality sector. The high level of agreement among staff for these factors, as shown in both the bar chart and chi-square mapping, highlights their centrality and urgency.



Source: Ntwakumba, A. (2022). *Staff turnover within restaurant kitchens in Cape Town central business district*. Unpublished master's thesis, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Note: Dots represent Chi-square (χ^2) values. Dot size reflects effect strength; colour reflects significance level. This figure provides a visual summary of the statistical significance for each factor, with the largest effects and most significant factors being underpayment, excessive working hours, and poor working conditions.

BCEA, Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

FIGURE 3: Statistical significance of workplace factors.

Demographic moderation

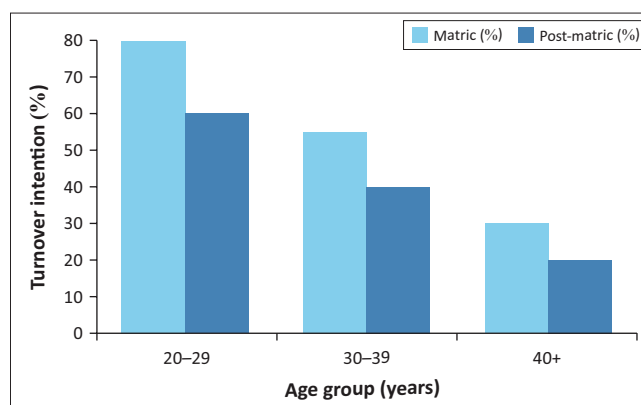
Figure 4 offers additional insights into how demographic variables moderate turnover intention. The clustered bar chart compares turnover intention by age group and qualification, showing that younger employees (20–29 years) with only a matric qualification report the highest turnover intention – close to or above 80%. In contrast, staff above 40 years of age or with post-matric qualifications demonstrate significantly lower turnover intention. This finding is consistent with prior South African studies (Chinomona & Dhurup, 2014; Mokoena et al., 2022; Takawira et al., 2014) and points to the need for targeted human resource interventions aimed at retaining young, less-qualified, and short-tenure employees.

Regression analysis

Furthermore, regression analysis (Table 3) confirmed that compensation, working hours, working conditions, recognition and/or advancement, and demographic variables collectively explained a substantial proportion of variance in turnover intent ($R^2 = 0.41$, $F = 13.12$, $p < 0.001$). This is comparable to the findings of Holston-Okoe (2017), who demonstrated that a multi-factorial approach best predicts turnover intention in the hospitality context.

Integration with prior research

The findings of this study strongly reinforce and extend the arguments presented by Mohsin et al. (2015), who cautioned against an over-reliance on a singular retention strategy in hospitality HRM. Their research, which analysed both linear and curvilinear relationships between turnover experiences and intention to leave, highlighted the risk inherent in focusing exclusively on one factor, such as increasing salaries



Source: Ntwakumba, A. (2022). *Staff turnover within restaurant kitchens in Cape Town central business district*. Unpublished master's thesis, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Note: This figure compares turnover intention by age group and qualification level.

FIGURE 4: Turnover intention by age and qualification.

TABLE 3: Regression coefficients for predictors of turnover intention.

Predictor	β	SE	t	p -value
Compensation	0.32	0.11	4.55	< 0.001
Working hours	0.29	0.10	4.11	< 0.001
Working conditions	0.25	0.09	3.88	< 0.001
Recognition and/or advancement	0.21	0.11	2.19	0.031
Demographics (combined)	0.18	0.09	2.01	0.045

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SE, standard error.

or improving job security, at the expense of a more holistic approach. Their 'too-much-of-a-good-thing' perspective (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013) is particularly pertinent for managers who may be tempted to deploy resources disproportionately toward one perceived solution, without considering the interconnected, multi-causal nature of turnover. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that kitchen personnel in the hospitality industry are classified into numerous unique groups, including chefs, restaurateurs, waiters, and scullery staff. These groups differ in terms of skill levels, salary ranges, responsibilities, and exposure to stressful situations at work. These variations are essential, as they influence employees' interactions, opinions regarding equity, and eventually their intention to leave.

In the current study, this multi-causality is evident in both the descriptive and inferential analyses. Figure 2 clearly illustrates that while underpayment and excessive working hours are the most frequently cited reasons for turnover, other factors, such as poor working conditions, external hiring practices, poor leadership, and lack of self-development, also play significant roles. The strength of these associations is statistically confirmed in Figure 3, where chi-square analyses reveal the significance and effect size of each workplace factor. Notably, Table 3 shows that no single predictor, when taken alone, accounts for the majority of variance in turnover intention; rather, it is the combined effect of compensation, hours, working environment, recognition, and advancement that best explains the observed trends ($R^2 = 0.41$).

This multi-factorial reality is echoed in the work of Holston-Okoe (2017), whose research in the United States' hospitality

sector demonstrated that retention is maximised not by isolated improvements to pay or benefits, but through integrated HR strategies that address compensation, job satisfaction, employee engagement, and the physical and social work environment. In Holston-Okae's regression models, as in the present study, each variable contributed a unique and significant effect to the prediction of turnover intention, with the overall explanatory power of the model increasing as more workplace dimensions were included. Such findings highlight the necessity for restaurant managers to move beyond reactive or incoherent interventions, such as occasional salary increases or sporadic recognition programmes, and instead invest in complementary, sustained efforts targeting multiple aspects of the employee experience.

Furthermore, this integrated approach aligns with contemporary theoretical frameworks, such as Job Embeddedness Theory (Yao et al., 2004) and Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory (1959). Job Embeddedness Theory posits that employees are less likely to leave when they perceive strong social and professional connections (links), a good fit with organisational culture and values, and significant personal sacrifices associated with departure. The present study's findings, particularly in the context of demographic moderation (Figure 4), emphasise the importance of fostering these connections and investing in professional development, especially for younger and less-qualified staff.

Similarly, Herzberg's theory distinguishes between 'motivators', intrinsic factors that enhance satisfaction, and 'hygiene factors', extrinsic conditions, such as pay and working conditions, which, if deficient, lead to dissatisfaction and turnover. The data from this study (Table 3) suggest that both sets of factors require simultaneous attention for effective retention.

Collectively, this body of evidence underscores that sustainable reductions in kitchen staff turnover will not result from addressing a single issue in isolation. Instead, the most effective HR strategies are those that are comprehensive and evidence-based, systematically integrating improvements in compensation, scheduling, working conditions, recognition, and opportunities for advancement, tailored to the diverse needs of the workforce. The alignment of the present study's results with this growing consensus in the literature not only validates its findings but also provides managers with a clear roadmap for developing impactful, long-term retention strategies.

Implications for academia

This study contributes to academic scholarship by providing empirical evidence from an under-researched context, namely, restaurant kitchens in South Africa. The support for H1–H4 reinforces the continued relevance of Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory and Job Embeddedness Theory in explaining turnover intention in contemporary hospitality settings. The findings also demonstrate

the value of integrating economic, organisational, and developmental variables within a single analytical framework.

The revised H5 findings extend existing literature by showing that age and qualification shape how workplace factors relate to turnover intention, highlighting the importance of demographic sensitivity in turnover research.

Academically, the study also illustrates the importance of context-specific research in the Global South, encouraging scholars to move beyond hotel-centric or Global North-focused analyses of hospitality turnover.

Implications for hospitality industry practice

At an industry level, the findings emphasise the need for collaborative, system-wide responses to kitchen staff turnover. Hospitality associations, training institutions, government stakeholders, and industry partners should collaborate to promote best-practice HR standards, knowledge sharing, and sector-wide retention strategies. Strengthening partnerships between restaurants, culinary schools, and training providers can improve skills alignment and create clearer career pathways for kitchen staff.

Reducing turnover is not only a human resource concern but also a strategic sustainability issue for the hospitality industry. High turnover undermines service quality, operational continuity, and long-term competitiveness. The study's results suggest that a more stable kitchen workforce can be achieved through integrated efforts that align workplace practices, policy frameworks, and skills development initiatives. The following are specific recommendations for restaurant managers and owners to address the reported findings:

Implement competitive pay structures

The Department of Employment and Labour outlines minimum wages to ensure that a standardised salary approach is implemented; however, regular wage benchmarking and performance-based incentives are crucial to address the primary driver of underpayment.

Ensure reasonable working hours

Compliance with *Basic Conditions of Employment Act* (BCEA), improved scheduling predictability, and provision of adequate rest periods are essential to mitigating burnout and excessive overtime.

Upgrade working conditions

Investment in kitchen safety, modern equipment and technology, and staff wellness programmes can significantly reduce attrition related to poor working environments.

Create career pathways

Develop clear promotion criteria and structured development programmes, particularly for young and entry-level staff, to enhance job embeddedness and reduce turnover intent.

Recognise and reward performance

Implement regular feedback, non-monetary recognition, and employee appreciation initiatives to improve morale and reduce feelings of undervaluation.

Train servant leaders

Invest in leadership development to cultivate supportive and empowering management styles, which can reduce negative perceptions of poor leadership, as shown in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Support for vulnerable demographics

Provide mentorship, upskilling opportunities, and retention incentives specifically for younger, less educated, and short-tenure employees, as highlighted by the demographic variations seen in Figure 4.

Implication for policy

The results underscore the importance of effective enforcement and contextual application of labour legislation in the hospitality sector. There is strong support for reinforcing the relevance of the *BCEA* and Sectoral Determination 14: Hospitality Sector, South Africa, particularly in relation to minimum wages, working hours, overtime compensation, and occupational health and safety standards.

Polymakers and labour inspectors should strengthen compliance monitoring, especially in small and independent restaurants where regulatory adherence is often inconsistent.

Furthermore, reducing kitchen staff turnover requires a coherent, multi-departmental policy approach that aligns labour regulation, tourism development objectives, and skills development strategies. The findings of this study have important implications for public policy, particularly for the Department of Tourism, labour regulators, and industry bodies responsible for workforce development and sector sustainability within South Africa's hospitality industry. There is a need for coordinated policy interventions that address compensation, working hours, and working conditions as foundational determinants of labour retention in restaurant kitchens.

From a regulatory perspective, government departments responsible for labour oversight must strengthen the enforcement and monitoring of existing labour legislation, including the *BCEA* and Sectoral Determination 14: Hospitality Sector, South Africa. Improved compliance with minimum wage requirements, overtime provisions, and occupational health and safety standards is particularly critical in the restaurant subsector, where informal employment arrangements remain prevalent. Enhanced inspection capacity and collaboration with industry associations could reduce non-compliance and improve employment stability.

Beyond regulatory compliance, the Department of Tourism has a strategic role to play in addressing kitchen staff turnover

as part of its broader mandate to promote tourism growth, service excellence, and sector competitiveness. High turnover among kitchen staff undermines service quality, culinary innovation, and destination reputation, all of which are central to South Africa's tourism value proposition. The Department of Tourism should therefore integrate hospitality workforce retention and skills development more explicitly into national tourism strategies, master plans, and funding programmes.

The study highlights the importance of recognition and self-development opportunities. Policy initiatives led or supported by the Department of Tourism could incentivise restaurants to invest in training, mentorship, and career progression frameworks for kitchen staff. This may include expanding culinary training grants, supporting apprenticeship and learnership programmes in partnership with Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), and promoting nationally recognised skills pathways that enable progression from entry-level kitchen roles to supervisory and professional chef positions.

Younger and less-qualified employees are disproportionately affected by adverse workplace conditions and exhibit higher turnover intention. Accordingly, there is a need for targeted youth-focused policy interventions, such as entry-level employment incentives, subsidised training opportunities, and structured early-career support programmes, within the hospitality sector. The Department of Tourism, working alongside the Department of Higher Education and Training and relevant SETAs, is well-positioned to coordinate such initiatives to reduce early attrition and build a sustainable talent pipeline.

At an industry level, hospitality associations and tourism bodies should support the dissemination of best-practice human resource guidelines and promote compliance with labour standards as part of quality assurance and grading systems. Embedding workforce stability and decent work indicators into tourism grading, accreditation, or incentive schemes could further encourage restaurants to prioritise employee retention.

Summary

This study presents robust quantitative evidence demonstrating that kitchen staff turnover in Cape Town restaurants is not the result of a single isolated factor, but rather a complex interplay of economic, organisational, and demographic variables. The comprehensive statistical analysis, illustrated through Figure 2 and Figure 3 and detailed in Table 2 and Table 3, provides strong empirical support for Hypotheses H1, H2, and H3, confirming that underpayment, excessive working hours, and poor working conditions are the predominant drivers of employees' intention to leave. These findings are further reinforced by chi-square and regression analyses, which confirm the statistical significance and practical impact of these workplace factors.

In addition to these core economic and structural determinants, the findings lend empirical support to Hypothesis H4, demonstrating that organisational factors, particularly the lack of recognition and inadequate self-development opportunities, play a significant role in shaping turnover intention. Poor communication, limited appreciation, and the preference for external hiring over internal promotion contribute to feelings of disengagement and undervaluation among kitchen staff, reinforcing the conclusion that effective retention requires more than adjustments to pay and working hours alone.

Moreover, the evidence highlights that turnover intention is notably higher among younger and less-qualified employees, as illustrated in Figure 4. These findings provide support for the revised Hypothesis H5, indicating that age and qualification influence how workplace factors are associated with turnover intention. Younger, less-qualified staff appear more sensitive to adverse working conditions and limited development opportunities, whereas older and more qualified employees demonstrate greater employment stability. This demographic pattern suggests that generic, one-size-fits-all retention strategies are unlikely to be effective.

The data also reveal that while economic factors like pay and hours are critical, organisational culture, recognition, opportunities for advancement, and supportive leadership play indispensable roles in shaping employee decisions to stay or leave. Poor communication, lack of appreciation, and external hiring for promotions all contribute to a sense of disengagement and undervaluation among kitchen staff. Thus, the challenge is not simply about increasing wages or reducing hours, but about creating an environment where employees see a future for themselves, feel respected and supported, and have tangible opportunities for growth.

Collectively, the results indicate that addressing kitchen staff turnover requires comprehensive, multi-level interventions. At the operational level, restaurant managers should prioritise regular wage benchmarking (H1), compliance with regulated working hours (H2), and improvements in physical and psychosocial working conditions (H3).

In parallel, human resource practices should emphasise recognition, internal career pathways, and continuous skills development (H4), particularly for younger and less-qualified staff whose turnover intention is most pronounced (H5).

At the policy and industry level, associations and government agencies must play an active role in promoting the formalisation and professionalisation of kitchen staff roles. This includes offering training grants, setting industry standards, and supporting research into best practices for employee retention. Given the unique challenges posed by the South African labour market, such interventions are essential for building a more stable and committed hospitality workforce.

Conclusion

Kitchen staff turnover in Cape Town restaurants is a multi-faceted and deeply entrenched problem, rooted in economic hardship, organisational gaps, and demographic disparities. The findings of this study strongly argue for a data-driven, holistic approach to retention; one that integrates competitive compensation, improved working conditions, clear career pathways, and a supportive management culture. Only through such comprehensive and sustained efforts can the sector hope to reduce staff churn, enhance service quality, and ensure long-term organisational success.

Future research should build on these insights by employing qualitative methods to capture the lived experiences and nuanced motivations of employees, as well as longitudinal studies to assess the effectiveness of implemented interventions over time. Expanding this research across different regions and hospitality segments in South Africa will further inform the development of evidence-based HR strategies tailored to the sector's evolving needs.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Athi Ntwakumba : Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Tshinakaho Nyathela-Sunday: Data curation, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Validation. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Athi Ntwakumba, upon reasonable request.

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