

Winning the Talent War: The Role of Talent Management in Retaining Healthcare Professionals in Sulaymaniyah

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between talent management practices and employee retention among private hospital employees in Sulaymaniyah. Specifically, it aims to assess the extent to which talent management is practiced and the level of employee retention within private healthcare institutions in the city. Data was collected from 127 employees using a snowball sampling approach, and responses were analyzed through descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation analysis. The results reveal a strong and significant positive relationship between talent management and employee retention, indicating that effective talent management practices play a crucial role in enhancing employees' intention to remain within their organizations. These findings underscore the importance of strategic talent initiatives in strengthening workforce stability within the private healthcare sector.

Keywords: Talent Management, Employee Retention, Sulaymaniyah Private Healthcare Sector

Introduction

Talent management (TM) has evolved considerably since the late 1990s, initially driven by the concept of "The War for Talent" (Cappelli et al., 2017). It has emerged as a central theme in human resource management (HRM), covering critical areas such as value-based hiring, performance management, and leadership development (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013). Contemporary talent management emphasizes retaining valuable employees by providing supportive and engaging work environments. Effective practices in this area are associated with multiple organizational benefits, particularly enhanced employee retention (Oladapo, 2014). In Sulaymaniyah's growing healthcare sector, characterized by increasing facilities, rising service demands, and potential workforce shortages, the implementation of robust talent management strategies is especially important.

The healthcare industry in the Kurdistan Region faces challenges including talent shortages, high unemployment, and inconsistent human resource practices (Kareem, Sidiq, Othman, & Sabir, 2021). Investigating talent management in this context is essential to strengthen organizational capacity and support sector growth. As globalization increases, employees are more aware of their value to organizational success and sustainability (Morgan, 2017). Accordingly, this study examines the relationship between talent management and employee retention in private hospitals in Sulaymaniyah, aiming to address existing gaps in the literature, particularly within the Middle Eastern context.

Private healthcare organizations rely heavily on the expertise, motivation, and commitment of their employees to deliver high quality care. Talent management practices, including continuous learning, leadership development, and career progression, are critical for retaining skilled healthcare professionals and sustaining competitive advantage (Ingram & Glod, 2016). Despite its strategic significance, talent management still lacks comprehensive theories and standardized implementation methods (BCG & WFPMA, 2012; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Dries, 2013). Moreover, challenges in recruiting and retaining diverse talent, driven by skill gaps and demographic changes, remain significant (Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Özbilgin, & Game, 2013). This study contributes to understanding how talent management affects employee retention across different demographic groups in the Kurdistan healthcare sector.

The study's findings provide practical insights for healthcare organizations in Kurdistan to enhance talent management practices, improve employee performance, and strengthen organizational effectiveness (Bibi, 2019). The results highlight the need for continuous innovation and adaptation of talent strategies to remain competitive. Retaining skilled and committed employees is essential for organizational resilience and long-term success (Dias et al., 2022). The implications extend beyond the immediate context, offering actionable strategies for improving employee engagement and retention across Iraq's healthcare sector. Given the increasing pressures on healthcare workers, effective talent management and retention strategies are critical for workforce stability, organizational performance, and service quality (Oladapo, 2014; Weerasinghe, 2017).

This study aims to examine the relationship between talent management practices and employee retention among private hospital employees in Sulaymaniyah. It also explores the levels of talent management implementation and employee retention within these organizations. Additionally, the study investigates how specific talent management practices influence employees' intentions to remain, providing insights into strategies that can enhance workforce stability in the healthcare sector.

Research Objectives

This research seeks to find relationship between talent management practices and employee retention among private hospital employees in Sulaymaniyah. The primary research objectives are as follows:

- RO1 To identify the level of talent management practices at a private hospital in Sulaymaniyah.
- RO2 To identify the level of employee retention at a private hospital in Sulaymaniyah.

RO3 To examine the relationship between talent management practices and employee retention at a private hospital in Sulaymaniyah.

Literature Review

This section reviews various studies related to the key variables of the study, namely talent management and employee retention. It explores the theories and concepts that have emerged from prior research on how talent management influences employee retention, providing a deeper understanding of the problem under investigation. Furthermore, the section presents the research framework derived from these variables.

Talent Management

Talent management as a human resource management process has evolved significantly since its inception in the late 1990s, when the concept of “The War for Talent” served as its primary motivator (Michaels et al., 2001). This notion highlighted the competitive struggle among companies to attract the best candidates, often creating a lose-lose situation where, for example, if Company Y hired a top candidate from Company X, Company X would in turn hire from Company Y, negatively affecting both firms’ employee retention rates.

Today, talent management is widely adopted by HR professionals globally to make strategic decisions and gain a competitive advantage. According to Thorsen et al. (2013), TM is a comprehensive, interconnected process encompassing key organizational activities such as identifying, selecting, training, and retaining top talent. Talent attraction and development strategies promote employee engagement, motivation, and skill enhancement, thereby supporting organizations in building high-performing, sustainable businesses that meet strategic and operational objectives. Claus (2013) defines TM as “a portfolio of integrated HR activities that results in putting the right people with the right competencies in the right job in the right place at the right cost, as well as a set of sustainable organizational strategies that use human capital to achieve a competitive advantage.” Accordingly, the current trend in TM focuses on retaining valuable employees by providing a supportive and well-rounded work environment, with particular emphasis on recruitment and selection processes, which are areas where TM has the most significant impact.

Talent management can be broken down into two primary components: talent development and talent attraction. Talent attraction is a strategic approach used to recruit employees with specialized skills and ensure the right fit for each position (Songa & Oloko, 2016). Talent development, on the other hand, refers to nurturing employee skills, competencies, and attitudes through planned or unstructured learning programs, enhancing both individual and organizational performance (Rabbi et al., 2015).

This study applies the Human Capital Theory (HCT), proposed by Gary Becker in 1964, to better understand talent management. HCT is not merely a theory of human motivation; rather, it provides a framework for analyzing human capital by emphasizing the economic value of employees’ skills, knowledge, and abilities (Becker, 1964; Kenton, 2020). According to this theory, organizations can increase their competitive advantage by investing in employee education and training, thereby developing well-rounded human capital (Bibi, 2018). TM aligns closely with HCT as it integrates HR activities to place the right people with

the right competencies in appropriate roles, optimizing organizational outcomes while developing employees as valuable intangible assets (Claus, 2013).

By providing employees with opportunities for formal education, specialized training, and vocational development, organizations can enhance both individual capabilities and overall organizational performance, illustrating the mutual benefits of a strategic approach to talent management grounded in Human Capital Theory.

Employee Retention

According to Mukulesh (2013), employee retention is the practice of encouraging employees to remain with an organization for the duration of their employment. It serves as an important indicator of a business's ability to retain its workforce. The Hackman and Oldham Job Characteristics Model, developed by Richard Hackman and Greg Oldham, provides a useful framework for understanding employee retention. The model emphasizes the dual nature of retention as both an art and a science, focusing on fostering meaningful connections between employees and various aspects of their work environment, including organizational goals, job roles, performance standards, communication channels, interpersonal relationships, and motivational factors (Ali et al., 2014).

At individual, team, and organizational levels, the Hackman and Oldham Job Characteristics Model highlights the critical role of employee engagement in achieving organizational objectives. It identifies key factors influencing employees' commitment, motivation, and participation. Since strong workplace relationships are essential for retaining talent, effective employee retention strategies must prioritize developing these connections. In this context, employees must experience ongoing engagement to adapt and contribute effectively to the evolving demands of their roles (Radley et al., 2022).

The Job Characteristics Model, developed by Hackman and Oldham, provides a valuable framework for understanding talent management and employee retention. The model identifies five core job characteristics: task identity, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and skill variety, which significantly influence employee motivation, job satisfaction, and performance. These characteristics are closely aligned with talent management strategies, including the alignment of job responsibilities with employees' skills and interests, emphasizing the importance of their contributions to organizational objectives, granting decision-making autonomy, and providing regular performance feedback (Mukul et al., 2013).

The adoption of the Job Characteristics Model in this study highlights the critical role of employee engagement and its influence on multiple workplace outcomes. Although the model does not prescribe specific interventions, it serves as a theoretical foundation for understanding the factors that drive employee engagement and retention. Incorporating empirical studies that have applied this model enhances the validity and reliability of research findings. Additionally, integrating insights from complementary frameworks, such as Bakker and Demerouti's Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (2007), can further inform understanding of employee performance, retention, and well-being within organizations.

The JD-R model provides a structured approach for evaluating how job demands, such as workload and stress, and job resources, including coworker support, skill development opportunities, and performance feedback, affect employees' well-being and retention decisions. When job demands exceed available resources, employees are more likely to experience stress and dissatisfaction, increasing turnover risk. Conversely, when resources adequately support job demands, employees exhibit higher levels of engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

In practice, effective management of job demands involves strategies such as workload reduction, provision of support systems, targeted training and development, granting employees greater control over work processes, and regular performance feedback. These strategies enable employees to manage job challenges more effectively, enhancing their perceived value and organizational attachment. The JD-R model also recognizes individual differences in the perception of job demands and resources, highlighting the importance of tailoring organizational support and development initiatives. By applying the JD-R framework, organizations can cultivate a healthier work environment, enhance employee engagement, and improve retention outcomes, thereby benefiting both employees and organizational performance.

Relationship between Talent Management and Employee Retention

Numerous studies have been conducted globally to examine the relationship between talent management (TM) and employee retention. However, further research is required, as the independent factors may not be fully under researchers' control, rendering conclusions tentative rather than definitive (Gay & Airasian, 2003).

Abbas Ali (2011), in his book *Global Talent Management*, discusses the perception of TM in the Middle East, noting that the region has historically faced challenges in effective human capital management, with both governmental and corporate sectors largely neglecting TM practices. Similarly, Cappelli (2008) demonstrated that economic growth does not necessarily translate into improved human capital or enhanced well-being in the Middle East, a realization that organizations in the region are only recently beginning to acknowledge. Consequently, the demand for skilled employees is expected to increase, and without effective TM and retention strategies, organizations may encounter significant challenges. This suggests that insights drawn from Middle Eastern contexts may also be applicable to Iraq.

Lalitha (2012) identifies employee retention as one of the primary challenges for HR in the contemporary economy. In the Indian software industry, Vijay Kumar et al. (2012) note a crisis in attrition management and talent retention. Their study highlights the critical role of human resources in developing policies, procedures, and programs that enable organizations to retain valuable, skilled personnel who contribute significantly to business success.

Research by Stydom, Schultz, and Bezuidenhout (2014) on labor organizations in Gauteng, South Africa, indicates that effective TM practices positively influence retention rates. Employees reported higher levels of motivation, engagement, and commitment when organizations implemented practices such as attracting talent through reputation and

developing skills through training and education. Opportunities for growth and career progression were also linked to sustained retention.

In the twenty-first century, when human capital, a key intangible asset, is valued more highly than physical resources such as land and capital, TM has become a critical management tool. Organizations require skilled human capital to leverage technological advancements and maintain competitiveness in a globalized economy (Cappelli, 2008).

Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou (2019) examined TM and retention practices in luxury hotels across the UK, USA, Australia, and Greece. While TM is widely recognized, limited knowledge exists regarding its implementation, particularly across different national contexts (Thunnissen, 2016). Employees considered to "go above and beyond" were classified as talented (Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019). The study found that UK hotels exhibited more structured and effective TM and retention policies compared to the other countries, driven by a shortage of experienced and certified staff. Findings emphasized that employee engagement is critical for retention, advocating a hybrid approach that combines exclusive and inclusive TM strategies to enhance employee involvement.

Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen (2016) note that empirical research linking HRM and TM remains limited, and the field is still in its formative stages, with no universally accepted definitions of talent or TM. This highlights the importance of examining the role of technology in retention strategies. The proposed research framework for this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

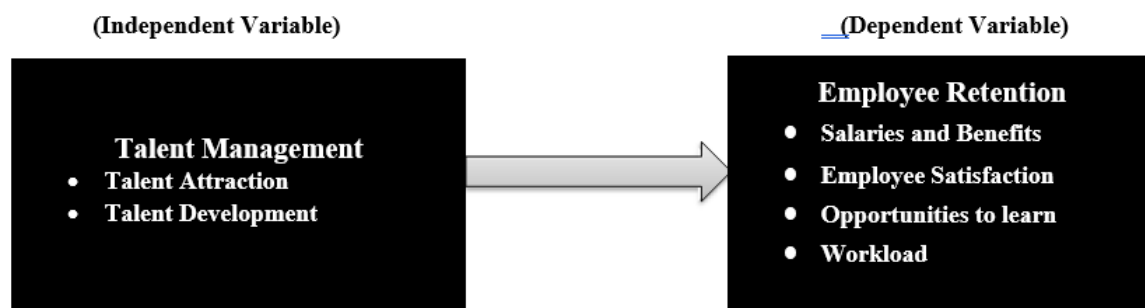


Figure 1 Proposed Conceptual Framework

Methodology

In order to obtain the necessary data for examining the relationship between talent management and employee retention, the target population of this study comprised 207 employees working in a local private hospital in the city of Sulaymaniyah. The sample size was determined based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling table, and respondents were selected using the snowball sampling technique. This study employed a cross-sectional design and used a quantitative approach, whereby data were collected through personally administered questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed using the traditional pencil-and-paper method, in which the enumerator read each item aloud and recorded the respondents' answers. A total of 129 questionnaires were returned, of which 127 were deemed usable. Two questionnaires were excluded due to substantial missing responses.

The instrument used to measure talent management was adapted from the work of El Dahshan, Keshk, and Doorgham (2018). Reliability analysis indicated that the independent variable, talent management, achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.934, which is categorised as a very good level of reliability according to Sekaran and Bougie (2013). Talent management reflects employees' perceptions of their organization's efforts to attract them and provide opportunities for skill development. The instrument consisted of 20 items divided into two dimensions, namely talent development and talent attraction, each comprising ten items. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The measurement instrument for employee retention was also adapted from El Dahshan, Keshk, and Doorgham (2018). The dependent variable yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.889, which is considered a good level of reliability. Employee retention captures employees' perceptions of the organizational factors that influence their intention to remain with their employer. This instrument comprised nine items covering salaries and benefits, employee satisfaction, opportunities for learning, and workload. Each of the first three dimensions contained three items, while the opportunities for learning dimension consisted of two items. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a five-point scale, where 1 denoted highly disagree and 5 denoted highly agree.

Findings

Research Objective 1: Level of Talent Management Practices

Talent management, as the independent variable, achieved a high overall mean score of 4.53, which falls within the "high" category according to the classification by Zikmund, Babin, Carr, and Griffin (2013). This indicates that talent management practices in the private hospital in Sulaymaniyah are implemented at a relatively strong level. Among the individual items, the highest mean score (4.76) was recorded for the statement assessing whether the organization actively monitors employees' performance and provides appropriate guidance, suggesting that respondents strongly perceive performance monitoring and feedback as part of the organization's talent management strategy. In contrast, the item with the lowest mean score (4.35), while still at a moderate-to-high level, concerned the extent to which the organization objectively identifies employees' training needs. This suggests that, although training needs are recognized, there may be room for improvement in the systematic identification and alignment of training programs with employees' development requirements.

Research Objective 2: Level of Employee Retention Intention

Employee retention among private hospital employees in Sulaymaniyah was found to be at a high level, with a mean score of 4.44. The item with the highest mean score (4.65) measured the extent to which employees feel engaged with their work. This indicates that employees experience a strong sense of involvement and commitment to their roles, which is a critical factor in promoting retention. High engagement reflects that employees find their work meaningful and are motivated to contribute to organizational objectives, thereby reducing turnover intentions.

The item with the lowest mean score (4.21), while still at a moderate-to-high level, assessed employees' perceptions of the competitiveness of the organization's salaries and

benefits. This suggests that, although employees are generally committed, there may be room to enhance compensation and benefits to further strengthen retention. Competitive remuneration and benefits are widely recognized as key drivers of employee loyalty and long-term organizational commitment.

Research Objective 3: Relationship between Talent Management Practices and Employee Retention Intention

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between talent management and employee retention ($r = .859$, $p < .001$), as shown in Table 1. This finding indicates that higher levels of talent management practices are closely associated with greater employee retention in private hospitals in Sulaymaniyah. In practical terms, organizations that implement effective talent management strategies—such as identifying high-potential employees, providing development opportunities, monitoring performance, and offering constructive feedback—tend to retain employees for longer periods.

According to Pallant (2013), correlation coefficients ranging from $\pm .50$ to $\pm .69$ indicate a high relationship. The coefficient observed in this study (.859) exceeds this range, suggesting a very strong association. This underscores that talent management is not only influential but may also be a key determinant of employee retention in the healthcare sector. Furthermore, the highly significant p-value ($p < .001$) confirms that this relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance, highlighting the critical role of talent management practices in reducing turnover intentions and fostering long-term workforce stability.

Table 1

Pearson's Correlation for Talent Management and Employee Retention

Variables	Employee Retention
Talent Management	0.859**
p-value	< 0.001

Note. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). N = 127.

Discussion

Research Objective 1: Level of Talent Management Practices

The first objective of this research was to identify the level of TM practices in the private hospital under study. The analysis revealed that the level of TM practices within the healthcare sector in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq is high. This suggests that TM procedures in the industry are improving and that employees generally hold a positive perception of TM initiatives. Although limited empirical research exists on the implementation of TM and talent philosophies in private organizations across emerging economies, including the Arab Middle East, the findings indicate that TM is gaining prominence within the local healthcare context. Despite its emerging nature, employees demonstrate a favourable perception of TM practices, although certain minor gaps remain that could potentially affect this perception in the future.

The results further indicate that the extent to which employee performance is monitored for the purpose of improvement and developmental feedback is high. This suggests that employees value organizational efforts to monitor performance and provide

constructive advice, which reflects the organization's commitment to talent development. As highlighted by Liu (2021), knowledge-based talent development initiatives must align closely with organizational strategy. The findings also show that many employees prefer organizations that offer clear career advancement opportunities.

Additionally, the findings reveal that while employees report a high level of TM practices overall, the specific practice of allocating a dedicated budget for training and development is comparatively lower. This implies that employees perceive their organizations as not fully investing in structured talent development planning, possibly due to financial constraints. Despite economic pressures, particularly those arising from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, these healthcare institutions are large-scale organizations. Therefore, allocating dedicated budgets for talent development remains essential and should be considered strategically.

The results also show that employees perceive their organizations as having strong reputations that attract talented workers. This underlines the importance of organizational attractiveness in effective recruitment, as it positively influences employees' attitudes and behaviours toward the organization (Gomes and Neves, 2010).

Overall, employees recognize the importance of TM practices, particularly in enhancing recruitment and selection methods that attract highly qualified individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to organizational success (Shah et al., 2021). These findings align with the Human Capital Theory, which emphasizes employees' preference for organizations that invest in enhancing their skills and competencies through education and training..

Research Objective 2: Level of Employee Retention Intention

The analysis of the second objective revealed that the level of employee retention among healthcare employees in private hospitals is high. This finding can be attributed to several factors that collectively explain the retention patterns observed within the healthcare sector in Sulaymaniyah. According to the Hackman and Oldham Job Characteristics Model, one effective way to retain employees is by providing training opportunities and developmental courses that enhance staff members' skills, value, and engagement.

The responses related to learning opportunities within the hospitals were conclusive, supporting the notion that structured development is valued by employees. Mehta, Kurbetti, and Dhankhar (2014) emphasise that employees are more likely to remain with an organization when career opportunities are available, resulting in greater loyalty and prolonged tenure. This perspective suggests that employee performance is closely linked to the organization's ability to engage its staff, with retention serving as a key indicator of effective performance management. Thus, one reason for the moderate level of retention may be the high level of involvement and emotional investment required from employees in their roles within the healthcare environment.

The findings also indicated that reducing excessive workloads may contribute to improved staff retention. While heavy workloads are common in healthcare settings, the Job Characteristics Model stresses the importance of managing these demands while maintaining

strong commitment to employee well-being, performance, and engagement. Balancing workloads can therefore enhance retention by mitigating burnout and dissatisfaction.

Employee retention in the region is also shaped by broader labour market dynamics, including limited job opportunities and restricted avenues for career development. The World Bank (2022) reports that youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa region remains significantly high, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened job availability and stability. Consequently, the observed retention levels can partly be attributed to these external constraints, as employees may feel compelled to remain with their current employers due to a lack of viable alternatives. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) further explains this trend by highlighting how unstable economic conditions, shortages of employment opportunities, and uncertain social and personal resources such as time, energy, and job security encourage employees to hold on to existing positions. Reduced workplace communication during the pandemic may also have created misunderstandings and disengagement, potentially influencing employees' decisions to leave.

Furthermore, generational factors may also contribute to the moderate level of employee retention. The healthcare sector workforce in the region is largely composed of Generation Y and Millennial employees, who are known to seek meaningful financial rewards, advancement opportunities, and work-life balance. Thompson (2011) notes that these cohorts are highly informed job seekers who are inclined to leave positions that do not meet their expectations or personal needs. In line with the JD-R model, when employees experience heightened job demands and insufficient resources, they are more likely to consider leaving due to increased stress and unmet needs.

Research Objective 3: Relationship between Talent Management Practices and Employee Retention Intention

The analysis of the third objective revealed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between TM practices and employee retention among private hospital employees in Sulaymaniyah. This finding aligns with recent empirical research demonstrating that TM is a critical driver of retention across various organizational contexts. For instance, Rahman and Daud (2025) proposed a conceptual model emphasizing that integrated TM strategies, particularly talent development, performance management, and structured career pathways, significantly improve retention outcomes.

In the healthcare sector specifically, the positive association between TM and retention has been reinforced by recent studies. Khan, Rehman, and Ali (2025) reported that TM practices, when combined with attention to employee well-being, significantly enhance retention among healthcare workers in Karachi. This supports the current study's findings by suggesting that TM not only equips employees with critical skills but also strengthens their sense of security and organizational attachment, which is essential in high-pressure environments such as hospitals.

The findings are also consistent with the work of Yaseen and Shah (2025), who found that recruitment and selection, management support, and career development significantly influence employees' intention to stay, with job satisfaction and organizational commitment

acting as mediators. This parallels the present study, where TM practices appear to enhance employees' perception of growth, stability, and organizational support, ultimately strengthening retention.

Earlier foundational studies further support these results. Kohestany and Yaghoubi (2017) argued that fluctuations in TM practices directly influence employee retention levels, highlighting the essential role of managers in developing and retaining talent. Similarly, Al-Debi and Al-Waely (2015) emphasized that organizations that invest in TM practices often build strong reputations as "talent generators," which subsequently enhances their ability to attract and retain high-performing employees. In line with this, Glaister et al. (2018) reported that TM strategies such as training, mentoring, and systematic career development significantly enhance the retention of talented employees, suggesting that TM acts as a robust motivational driver.

More recent literature also highlights contextual variations. Szczepańska-Woszczyna (2024) found that the effectiveness of TM in the Polish healthcare sector is influenced by factors such as job characteristics, employee age, and organizational culture. This indicates that while TM has a positive effect overall, its success depends on tailoring strategies to specific demographic and organizational contexts. Additionally, Hamid, Fernandes, and Kumar (2024) note that in emerging-market healthcare systems, modern HRM practices, including job autonomy, knowledge sharing, and relational support, strengthen the impact of TM on employee retention and engagement.

Taken together, these studies reinforce the conclusion that well implemented TM practices significantly contribute to employee retention. However, the effectiveness of TM depends on its alignment with employee needs, organizational culture, and job demands. In the context of Sulaymaniyah's private hospitals, the strong correlation found in this study suggests that investment in TM, particularly training, talent development, and career progression, can play a critical role in retaining skilled healthcare professionals.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the level of talent management (TM) practices and employee retention, as well as to explore the relationship between these variables among private hospital employees in Sulaymaniyah. The findings reveal that both TM practices and employee retention are perceived to be at a high level. Moreover, the results demonstrate a strong and significant positive relationship between TM and employee retention.

The study highlights that organizations that invest in training, skill development, and structured talent development initiatives are more likely to retain employees. Additionally, talent attraction plays a critical role, as employees value organizations with strong reputations and opportunities for professional growth. Therefore, TM is not only vital for enhancing an organization's image but also serves as a strategic mechanism to strengthen employee retention.

Given the limited research on TM and employee retention in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq, this study provides valuable insights and underscores the need for further empirical investigation. Overall, the findings confirm that effective TM practices are key

drivers of employee retention in the private healthcare sector in Sulaymaniyah. Future research should consider exploring potential mediating factors such as job satisfaction, burnout, organizational support, and employee well-being, as well as examining how contextual factors specific to the Middle Eastern healthcare environment influence the TM-retention relationship.

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