

What do Hotel Managers Think of Employee Rewards? An Exploration of Five-Star Hotels In Cape Town

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Abstract: Reward systems are important tools that management can use to motivate employees; the main objective of organizations in awarding rewards is to attract and retain efficient, productive, and motivated employees. However, there is no evidence available regarding managers' perceptions of employee rewards in five-star hotels in Cape Town. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perceptions of five-star hotel managers about the reward systems offered to employees. Further, this paper attempts to explore the influence and impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the employee reward systems offered at five-star hotels. A total of 14 interviews were conducted with managers working in four selected five-star hotels. The study used semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data. The data were analysed using Creswell's six steps. The study's findings indicate that managers offered distinct types of rewards to their employees, including extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Managers revealed that extrinsic rewards, specifically money, are the most preferred rewards. The study revealed that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic led to hotels adjusting their employee reward systems to offer less extrinsic rewards and more intrinsic rewards. This paper concludes by recommending strategies to hotel management for enhancing the type of rewards offered to employees and offering utilisation of effective intrinsic rewards. This is to ensure that employees increase their value towards intrinsic rewards as much as they value extrinsic rewards. Implications for future research are also presented.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Employee motivation, Employee rewards, Five-star hotels, Managers' perceptions

1. Introduction

One of the strategic tools used for retaining and attracting prospective employees, as well as assisting current employees to better their performance, is rewards management (Monteiro et al., 2020). Reward systems are important tools that management can use to motivate employees. Therefore the appropriate selection of rewards becomes significant for employers in increasing the commitment levels of their employees. Employees who work with a sense of passion, enthusiasm and commitment tend to make businesses grow significantly. For employees to improve their abilities, they need reward systems to motivate them (Victor & Hoole, 2021).

Within the hotel sector, it is documented that the reward system offered is not adequate and subsequently does not motivate employees (Prabhakar, 2019). The fact is that the hospitality industry has failed to introduce appropriate reward systems to retain existing employees. Prabhakar (2019) claims that insufficient reward systems in hospitality have resulted in an enormous turnover rate compared to other industries globally. Recent studies also present the argument that employees want to be rewarded not only for work done but also for any input that adds value to the organization (Victor & Hoole, 2021). As managers have the responsibility to implement rewards and to retain employees, their impressions of the employee rewards on offer are important. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore the perceptions of hotel managers on employee reward systems.

Although several studies have been conducted on employee reward systems within the hotel industry in the African context (Muchiri 2016; Sitati 2017; Odunayo, 2022) and globally (Dulanjan 2017; Koo et al., 2020; Youniss et al., 2020), these studies have focused on employee views and, for the most part, have used quantitative or mixed-method approaches. Therefore, this paper reports on the perspective of management on employee rewards in five-star hotels located in the Central Business District (CBD) of Cape Town, South Africa.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reward Systems

A reward is given to someone in exchange for their services or effort (Nigusie & Getachew, 2019). The main objective of organizations in bestowing rewards is to attract and retain efficient, productive, and motivated employees (Kathombe, 2018). The absence of reward systems has a negative impact on employees: employees become demotivated, and their performance can decline (Manzoor et al. 2021). Therefore, an appropriate selection of rewards can assist employers in increasing the commitment level of their employees (Odunayo,

2022). The study of Aguinis et al. (2013) revealed that the most effective reward and incentive system is a combination of financial and non-financial rewards. According to Chan (2022), human behaviour is driven by a desire to meet hierarchically ordered needs, which are associated with both financial and non-financial rewards. As a financial reward, money can meet lower-order physiological and safety needs (Chan, 2022). However, when lower-order needs are met, employees strive for higher-order needs such as social standing, esteem, and self-actualisation (Chan, 2022).

Rewards comprise extrinsic (financial) and intrinsic (non-financial) rewards that an organization provides for its employees in return for the effort they contribute to the organization (Nigusie & Getachew, 2019). A study by Dulanjan (2017) that investigated the relationship between rewards (extrinsic and intrinsic) and operational-level employee performance and its impact found a strong positive relationship between rewards management and operational-level employee performance. This study focuses on the two reward typologies systems (extrinsic and intrinsic), which are discussed below.

2.1.1 Extrinsic Rewards

Extrinsic rewards are material benefits with which employers reward their employees for work they have done in their employment contracts (Victor & Hoole, 2017). Extrinsic rewards include financial incentives such as cash, retirement benefits, health insurance plans, remuneration, salaries, bonuses, and extra benefits such as night allowances, medical aid and transport allowances (Kathombe, 2018). Extrinsic rewards help meet basic living expenses such as bills while offering job security through a sense of being valued by the company (Victor & Hoole, 2021). While money is important as a pre-requisite to survival and security, most authors maintain that extrinsic rewards are vital as ways of recognising employees' worth and improving their self-esteem, thus giving them a sense of fulfilment (Haruna et al., 2019).

Although extrinsic rewards may result in employees becoming motivated by money and benefits, thereby undermining intrinsic interests in their work (Muchiri, 2016), they nevertheless remain the most basic driver for daily activities. It is also important for managers to understand the benefits and shortcomings of these rewards. Various advantages of extrinsic rewards include increasing productivity, creating a desire to achieve goals, and increasing self-esteem and morale. Similarly, the disadvantages of extrinsic rewards include being effective only for a short-term period; they are often a finite process and often follow a course of diminishing returns, to mention but a few (Regoli, 2019).

2.1.2 Intrinsic Rewards

Intrinsic rewards are internal in nature, and employees achieve them by completing their tasks successfully (Victor & Hoole, 2017). These rewards are primarily psychological and are determined by an individual's effort and aptitude (Victor & Hoole, 2021). Intrinsic rewards include the possibility of performing different or diverse activities, doing work that is stimulating, taking on more responsibility that in turn means taking part in decision-making and generally finding joy in the freedom and discretion of one's job (Khan et al., 2017). Other types of intrinsic reward are (1) feelings of self-esteem, (2) personal satisfaction, (3) challenge, (4) achievement, (5) personal and professional growth, (6) variety, (7) autonomy, (8) responsibility, (9) recognition, (10), status, and (11) praise from superiors and co-workers (Muzafary et al., 2021).

Intrinsic rewards are more likely to have prolonged effects since they are inherent in individuals (Victor & Hoole, 2021). Muzafary et al. (2021) emphasise that managers must understand how valuable intrinsic rewards are in the workplace as they are instrumental in unlocking the power of personal motivation. To this end, managers need to understand the advantages of intrinsic rewards, which include persistence, engagement, an increase in employee performance and an increase in loyalty and dedication. While intrinsic rewards have no significant disadvantages, some flaws are noted; for example, an employee may work insanely hard for something they are extremely passionate about (Regoli, 2019). In this way, intrinsic rewards can cause an individual to disregard safety standards (Renard & Snelgar, 2016).

2.2 Employee Preferences on Rewards

As organizations struggle to attract, motivate, and retain a competent and high-performing workforce, adapting traditional reward systems to focus on employee preferences has become essential. The question of whether or not reward systems should be customised for each employee is highly contested. Research has shown that individuals' reward preferences are influenced by their personal demographic characteristics (Snelgar et al., 2013). Reward systems that take into account these traits and preferences of employees can boost employee motivation, which in turn can improve performance (Victor & Hoole, 2021). Therefore, it is advantageous to give

employees freedom of choice when it comes to the many available reward categories, enabling the creation of "diverse, employee-initiated award profiles" (Victor & Hoole, 2021).

Bussin and Thabethe (2018), in a study on reward preferences in South Africa's media industry, disclosed that participants prioritised the rewards of base pay or salary, merit increase tied to individual achievement, incentives and bonus, safety and security at work, and market-related income. The findings also showed that the most popular and important reward category for attracting, retaining, and motivating employees is monthly salary (base pay). Therefore, managers need to have reward strategies that address employee needs and ensure effective, balanced reward systems. The goal of a reward strategy is to offer solutions to the following questions: "What should we change about our reward practices to make sure they are appropriate?"; "How are we going to get there, exactly?" (Mabaso, 2017). By addressing these questions, managers will be able to provide effective, balanced reward systems even during periods of disruption, such as the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was reported to have affected employee reward offerings.

2.3 Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Employee Reward Systems

In December 2019, the Chinese government declared that new virus cases had been detected and designated coronavirus illness 2019 (COVID-19), becoming a global pandemic (Davahli et al., 2020). In 2020, the pandemic devastated the tourism sector in South Africa, as it did around the world (Rogan & Skinner, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021), and hotels were severely impacted, influencing the reward systems being offered to employees.

The COVID-19 epidemic presented new challenges both to the hospitality industry and to academia (Gursoy & Chi, 2020). During the epidemic in India, the hospitality industry experienced significant employment losses, forced wage reductions, and mandatory definite or indefinite leave without pay (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2020). The findings of Kaushal and Srivastava's study were similar to this study, with employees working in five-star hotels in the Cape Town CBD witnessing employment losses, salary reductions, retrenchment and reduced working hours. There is, however, limited research on the rewards system during the pandemic. Nevertheless, in a study by The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2020) on how reward practices were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, most respondents described COVID-19's negative financial impact on their employers. Another study was conducted by Korn Ferry Digital (2020) on COVID-19 impacts on rewards and benefits, and the findings indicate that most organizations experienced salary freezes or smaller salary increases.

3. Methodology

The qualitative approach was used for this study because of its suitability for gaining a detailed understanding of existing knowledge in a domain (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This research invoked an interpretive paradigm which enabled the researcher to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon under investigation. The study made use of semi-structured interviews using an interview guide as a tool to collect the data. A non-probability method with a purposive and convenience sampling technique(s) was used for the study. The study included 14 managers in the administrative sections of the hotels concerned (2 HR managers, 2 marketing managers, 4 front office managers, 4 reservation managers and 2 accounts managers).

The data analysis of the study adopted Creswell's six steps. Data were organised, sorted, and compared with various codes by listening to the recorded interviews. Data similarities were assigned codes and categorised, which were organised into themes. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences. All ethical protocols were observed.

4. Findings

4.1 Manager Profiles

The findings from the demographic profile of managers in five-star hotels indicate that more females (8) worked in the administrative divisions of five-star hotels than males (6), and the majority of managers (10) had obtained formal tertiary qualifications, although no managers had obtained Masters or PhD qualifications. The remaining participants (4) had only a Matric (senior certificate). Regarding years of service, (7) of the managers had been at the hotel for less than three years, and the majority of managers (12) had been in their position for less than five years. The table below shows the demographic profile of managers.

Table 1: Participants’ Demographic Profile

Demographic criteria	Categories	Frequency
Gender	Male	6
	Female	8
Education level	PhD	0
	Masters	0
	Honours	2
	Bachelor	2
	Advanced Diploma	2
	Diploma	4
	Matric	4
	Title or designation	HR and learning & development manager
Front office manager		4
Accounts manager		2
Reservations manager		4
Marketing manager		2
Level of service	< 3 years	7
	4 – 6 years	5
	7 – 9 years	0
	> 10 years	2

Source: Researcher’s construct

4.2 Employee Reward Systems

Managers stated that they offered both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Two main reward categories (financial and non-financial) and 16 items (6 financial and 10 non-financial) were disclosed by the managers as presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Categories of Reward Systems

Non-financial rewards	Financial rewards
Appreciation/ Praising	Commission
Training	Salary increase
Birthday gifts/ presents	Cash (in hand)
Recognition	Shopping vouchers
Employee of the month	Provident fund
Complimentary stay	Bonus
Positive feedback from managers	
Meal voucher	
Delegation	
Mentoring	

Source: Researcher’s construct

When managers were asked what are the employee rewards system they offer to employees, participant 2 identified two types of rewards—financial and non-financial rewards. Participant 2 further expressed that

financial rewards depend on how the hotel and its employees perform. For non-financial rewards, they have a points system to rate an employee's performance.

Participant 2 stated:

"So currently, obviously, there is the basic, which is the financial aspect of a reward system. So, if the hotel does well, how employee's performance and impact on how the hotel is going to do "financially" ... there are also non-financial rewards where employees applaud you when you're doing well, also get training where you need to pick out your weak areas".

This sentiment was shared by Participant 10:

"It's a combination of both financial and non-financial rewards. Birthday gifts, staff meeting, shopping vouchers, certificates, guest reviews incentives, job training, training"

Managers were then asked if they offered the same rewards to all employees. The majority of managers stated that they offered the same rewards to all employees but noted that the reward systems sometimes differed according to the department. For example, at the front desk, a commission was awarded for upselling the room, and there were tips. A typical view was expressed by Participant 7:

We offer the same rewards throughout the entire hotel, for all departments, and all staff, to just make it equal and fair for everybody ... The structured rewards are the same, but there are also departmental rewards like commissions and tips which are for certain individuals.

This sentiment was further supported by Participant 13 who highlighted:

"Yes, we do offer the same rewards to employees, but it also probably differs with departments"

4.3 Reward Preferences of Employees

The study found that most managers were of the view that employees preferred financial rewards and, more specifically, money. To provide more insight, participant 5 responded:

"Everyone prefers cash... cash rewards allow the employee to then go home and sort out their personal bills, personal accounts buy whatever they would like".

Participant 13 agreed:

"I think most people prefer financial rewards. It is always money-related"

The managers were then asked about the possible impact of the absence of rewards and they were all convinced that the absence of rewards would have a negative impact on employees and the hotels generally. One of the managers (participant 9) responded by stating:

"People will be demotivated, the morale will be low, and so employees will come to work because they have to"

Another example is provided by Participant 8 who states:

"The staff behaviour will definitely go down, the quality of work that you receive from the staff will go down. So, it will have a negative impact on the employees if you don't have any of the rewards"

4.4 Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Employee Reward Systems

Managers indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted the hotel industry and the employee rewards policies. Monetary rewards such as salaries and bonuses were either reduced or deferred (Nyathela-Sunday et al.2022). Participant 14 emphasised that:

"It affected financial part; we didn't meet the target, financial rewards were reduced, some were suspended, no bonuses or suspension gathering of reward ceremony"

Hotels reduced or suspended non-monetary incentives that yielded a financial cost, such as training and development programmes, staff outings, staff awards and celebratory functions. This impact is further presented by Participant 11 as follows:

"...The hotels were closed. So, there was no income coming from anywhere our salaries were cut by 30% on all levels, training and development has reduced a bit as we don't have the extra money. So, it has affected a lot in a sense that everything that was monetary involved, we had to cut it".

Moreover, managers also stated that there were also retrenchments, salary cuts, layoffs and limited shifts for employees. Participant 4 stated the following:

“During covid-19, we provided more non-financial rewards than financial rewards, as to cut the costs. The hotel was not doing well; most of our employees were on temporary layoff, reduced salary and retrenchments as well”

5. Discussion

According to the participants' demographic profiles, there are more females (8) than males (6) working in managerial positions in five-star hotels in the selected study area. This is supported by evidence from the literature, which suggests that globally, women outnumber men in the hotel industry (Madgavkar et al., 2021). Despite this dominance, women are still grossly underrepresented in top executive and management positions at hotels (Olmsted, 2022), which supports the call for a transformed hospitality sector. In contrast, the hospitality industry's business environment is dominated by males and encourages male professionals to progress in their fields (Russen et al., 2021). As a result, fewer management opportunities in the hospitality industry are adequate to meet females' expectations (Russen et al., 2021).

Furthermore, most hotel managers working in Administration had a tertiary qualification, while a few only had Matric. These findings are consistent with Swanepoel's (2020) call for employees of five-star hotels to have relevant qualifications to work in the hospitality industry, particularly in the area of administration. There is an expanding global need for qualified workers in the hospitality industry (Rahimi et al., 2018). Since education is a key factor in ensuring that skills are imparted to people, hotels need more qualified managers who possess specific skills for them to perform successfully in their work positions.

This study found that both financial and non-financial rewards are used in five-star hotels. These findings are consistent with the study by Aguinis et al. (2013), which focused on what monetary rewards can and cannot do—how to show employees the money. The study revealed that the most effective rewards and incentives system is a combination of financial and non-financial rewards. Therefore, balanced reward systems are considered a basic tool for business growth as well as organizational development. According to Chan (2022), human behaviour is driven by a desire to meet hierarchically ordered needs, and these desires are associated with both financial and non-financial rewards. Lower-order physiological and safety demands can be satisfied with money as a financial incentive (Chan, 2022). When lower-order needs are satisfied, however, workers aspire to meet higher-order needs, including social, esteem, and self-actualization.

The findings of this study foreground the idea that financial rewards are important to employees. The results revealed that financial rewards, specifically money, are the most preferred rewards. The findings of this study are consistent with Victor and Hoole (2021), who state that financial rewards are unique in that they are able to satisfy the differing needs of individuals. Money is important as it is prerequisite to survival and security for employees at five-star hotels. The findings suggest that the reason for employees' preference for financial rewards may be because the pay in the hotel industry is at the minimum wage rate because hotels only pay employees what is required by labour law (du Plessis, 2015).

The study also found that the hotels offered the same range of rewards to all employees except the informal rewards that differed according to departments; for example, at the front desk, commission for upselling accommodation, and tips. This differentiation is supportive of the notion earlier presented by Mabaso (2017), that rewards offered need to have reward strategies that address employees' needs and ensure effective, balanced reward systems. However, this is contrary to Adams' (1963) equity theory which maintains that employees should be provided with equal and consistent rewards to foster a healthy environment and avoid competition.

Managers were of the view that the absence of rewards would have a negative impact on the hotels, and this is aligned with the assertions expressed by Manzoor et al. (2021), who argue that the absence of reward systems results in employees becoming demotivated and their performance can decline. A reward system binds employees and fosters positive relationships between them and the organization's goals. Therefore, employees believe that if an organization provides rewards and trusts them, they are more willing to embrace responsibility and go above and beyond to ensure they reach organizational performance goals (Alimawi & Muda 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has been documented to have had a disastrous impact on the hotel industry as a whole (Gursoy & Chi, 2020) and its rewards policies (Korn Ferry Digital, 2020). The study found that due to a reduction in hotel revenue, both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards were impacted. Financial rewards such as salaries were

reduced, which aligns with the study conducted by Korn Ferry Digital (2020) on COVID-19 impacts on rewards and benefits, which indicated that most organizations experienced salary freezes or smaller salary increases.

In addition, the study discovered that non-financial rewards were impacted, such as no staff gatherings for rewards ceremonies and no Christmas year-end functions. Furthermore, managers reported that the pandemic had an adverse effect on the employment dynamics of hotels as the five-star establishments had to retrench some employees and reduce working hours or shifts. This is consistent with the study conducted by Nyathela-Sunday et al., (2022) in the hospitality industry in South Africa, which showed that 47.1% of employees were temporarily laid off, 54.2% of businesses had lower compensation, 37.4% of firms retrenched employees, 12.5% had to furlough employees, and 23.9% of businesses encouraged employees to work from home. This confirms COVID-19 has had a catastrophic economic impact on hospitality businesses, particularly in the South African hospitality industry, resulting in changes to how the industry operates (Sao Joao, 2021). Therefore, managers must redesign their reward systems policy such that during a pandemic, rewards will remain a strong motivator to attract and retain employees.

6. Conclusions

The perceptions of hotel managers on employee reward systems are important to assess as managers are the implementers of rewards and are the direct report of employees. Extrinsic rewards are seen as good motivators for job performance and employee retention. Hotel managers were of the view that employees in the hotel industry prefer extrinsic rewards. The study also revealed that the absence of rewards would negatively impact hotels and would result in demotivated employees, low staff morale, a negative working environment, high staff turnover, poor staff performance, and absenteeism. Additionally, it was revealed that COVID-19 had had a negative impact on the hotel industry and also resulted in several changes in the reward systems, such as the cessation of extrinsic rewards, no staff gatherings or annual reward ceremonies.

7. Implications

The findings of the study will assist hotel owners, managers and human resource practitioners in devising and maintaining balanced employee reward systems. The findings will also assist hotel establishments to improve on the existing rewards systems to attract, motivate and retain employees. This study enhances the research literature within the hospitality field. Its results can complement current and future research of scholars, research institutes, and government entities regarding reward systems used at five-star hotels. Also, it is recommended that hotels must create innovative intrinsic rewards to drive further and enhance company performance.

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