

# Social Sustainability: Challenges to the Restaurant Sector

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**Abstract:** The guarantee of sustainable development has been a growing concern in various economic sectors, particularly from the economic and environmental perspective. In a post-pandemic scenario, the restaurant industry was one of the most affected worldwide and had to undergo abrupt changes to remain operational. Thus, this study primarily focuses on addressing the challenges faced by Human Resources Management (HRM) in attracting and retaining employees in the restaurant sector. This research aims to understand the challenges faced in retaining and attracting talent to restaurants and to explore the strategies that should be adopted to ensure the restaurant's social.

It used a qualitative methodology, with 10 (5 female and 5 male, with a mean age of 35 years old) semi-structured interviews with professionals who chose to leave this profession, to ensure a concerted view of the current state of the sector in the north of Portugal.

Through thematic analysis of the interviews, the results identified the current difficulties in attracting and retaining employees in the sector, as well as some HRM strategies that can address these challenges. These findings emerged from the themes 'Special Features of the Restaurant Sector' and 'Attraction and Retention Strategies.' The first theme contextualizes and characterizes the sector's reality, arising from four categories: activity context, company type, the COVID-19 pandemic, and turnover factors. Meanwhile, the second theme presents the attraction and retention strategies that HRM in restaurant companies should implement, while also exploring some challenges faced in designing and implementing these strategies in practice. Specifically, recruitment and selection, compensation and benefits, onboarding, integration and socialization, and career management.

In conclusion, social sustainability still has little prominence in the restaurant sector. To become more attractive, the restaurant sector needs to invest in better non-monetary benefits, such as flexible working hours, health insurance, professional recognition, training investment, and career advancement opportunities. This study intends to help companies take measures to improve employee satisfaction and also increase talent retention and new employees' attraction.

**Keywords:** Social Sustainability, Human Resources Management, Attraction, Retention, Restaurant Sector

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## 1. Introduction

In the food services industry, a certain unpredictability has taken hold, making it difficult to discern patterns or trends. Competition is fierce, and entrepreneurs and managers are under constant pressure to offer products or services that are exceptional, distinctive, and aligned with their organization's goals, all while keeping an eye on internal changes. As consumer demand grows and restaurants fight for survival, they must be able to adapt to the current market. The restaurant industry has unique characteristics that set it apart from other tourism-related activities. For this reason, human resources play a pivotal role in ensuring a restaurant's success. During the current crisis, it's become increasingly important to make the sector more attractive to potential employees and retain current ones. After all, work and well-being are crucial components of social sustainability. For some individuals, work can feel like a daunting task as they strive to provide for their families, yet their income may not always suffice. For others, work is a source of personal satisfaction and fulfilment. It is crucial to find a balance between personal and professional life that allows all employees to work in an area they are genuinely passionate about (Alsulami *et al.* 2023). Social sustainability refers to the balance between work life, well-being, health, and safety for both employees and organizations (Blake-Beard *et al.* 2010). In recent times, work flexibility has become a top priority for many governments, academics, and employers in pursuit of social sustainability (Alsulami *et al.* 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a shift towards remote work and increased digitalization, resulting in unprecedented effects on office work concerning social sustainability, workplace, organizational innovation capabilities, and the well-being and performance of office workers (Babapour Chafi *et al.* 2022). The study aims to identify the perspective of employees on the process of attraction and retention in restaurant companies, and, to this end, we will answer the following research question, from which we intend to obtain answers and relevant information for the study: What is the perspective of employees regarding the strategies used by restaurants to attract and retain them? By obtaining relevant and insightful information, this study aims to improve the sector's ability to attract new employees and ensure their

satisfaction and fulfilment in their roles, ultimately leading to better retention rates. Additionally, the insights gained from this study can inform recruitment and selection processes, rewards management, career management, and training programs.

## 2. Literature Review

Businesses must showcase their ability to gather, restructure, renew and exploit resources to establish strengths that can be utilized to adapt to changes in the business environment. Armstrong (2009) suggests that organizations need to integrate various conditions valued by employees, such as salary, location, working conditions, training, and opportunities for career growth, to attract top talent in the market. The importance of HR in companies has become more apparent as managers have realized competitive advantages through providing services with higher quality, as well as due to the increasing costs of labour and the scarcity of personnel in some sectors of the hospitality industry (Boella and Goss-Turner, 2012). According to Camara (2016), company missions, visions, and values communicated through various channels are futile if employees don't feel and integrate them into their daily actions. To overcome this issue, HRM's role is to work with the company's cultural development strategies.

The workforce is demanding more opportunities for career growth and development, which can be attributed to their highly qualified skill sets (Almeida and Almeida, 2021). Due to the current job market's fluctuating dynamics, individuals are increasingly choosing to leave their current positions in search of more favourable opportunities that align with their professional goals. This constant uncertainty has led to changes in the "psychological contracts" between organizations and their employees, as organizations must navigate an environment of technological advancements, market fluctuations, and global economic, financial, social, and political turbulence (Cunha *et al.*, 2012). When employees feel that their organization has not fulfilled its contractual obligations, they perceive a violation of their psychological contract (Aggarwal and Bhargava, 2010). As a result, people's loyalty is primarily to their career development, followed by their profession and employer. The hospitality and tourism sector has seen significant growth in recent years, but the pandemic has exacerbated the shortage of qualified employees due to the sector's low attractiveness among young people. As the workforce continues to face numerous challenges, salary increases alone are no longer sufficient to attract and retain qualified talent. Also known as the "Gen Z" generation, they have revolutionized the labour system by prioritizing different variables and factors. The current work culture and management have led to issues such as insecurity, precariousness, uncertainty, limited control over wages, and restricted social/legal rights for workers (Yildirim *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with ongoing conflicts, has resulted in an economic and social environment that is impossible to sustain financially. Companies are struggling with debt and facing increased costs of energy, fuel, and raw materials (AHRESP, 2020). Restaurants are also faced with the added difficulty of sudden rent hikes, creating a worrying and challenging situation.

The restaurant industry, being one of the most competitive and dynamic sectors in the economy, faces several challenges in terms of human resources. These challenges include a shortage of qualified workers (AHRESP, 2022), high turnover rates (Gomes *et al.*, 2022), seasonality (Chiriko, 2021), lack of training and dignity of the profession (Baum, 2002), work-life balance (Jang *et al.*, 2015; Ayachit and Chitta, 2022), and insufficient salaries (Mckay *et al.*, 2012). To overcome these difficulties and promote social sustainability in organizations, it is imperative to know how to better attract and retain employees. Talent attraction is the process of identifying individuals with certain skills for a position that can add value to the organization (Camara, 2016). The recruitment and selection process is the best way to develop strategic actions aimed at attracting and adding talent to the organization to provide it with the skills necessary for success (Chiavenato, 2014). Talent retention, on the other hand, refers to the practices and strategies used by companies to retain their most talented employees and control their abandonment of organizations. These strategies include reception and integration processes (Byford *et al.*, 2017), management of rewards (Cunha *et al.*, 2012; Camara, 2016; Mahl and Silva, 2018), career management (Giley *et al.*, 2002), and training and development management (Buckley and Caple, 2009; Chiavenato, 2014). According to Ibrahim and Daniel (2018), talent retention is crucial for long-term organizational success, as it allows the company to maintain its strategic human capital and achieve a competitive advantage.

## 3. Method

This study utilizes a qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews with former restaurant employees who possess a minimum of five years of work experience and have voluntarily left the industry. By

doing so, we aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current reality of the sector in Portugal. Our main objective is to characterize the attraction and retention processes within restaurant companies from the perspective of those who have worked in the sector and to identify the reasons that led to their departure. In the data collection phase, we relied on primary data, which is essential for this type of research. Qualitative research provides a deep understanding of the human aspect of an issue, by focusing on a smaller sample than quantitative research. It is characterized by its objectivity, which allows for the discovery of solutions to the problem at hand by exposing the participants' viewpoints on the topic under analysis (Barnham, 2015).

The interview guide was carefully crafted based on a thorough literature review. It not only gathered sociodemographic and professional information about the interviewees but also delved into their perspectives on attraction and retention strategies they had encountered in their past restaurant experiences. The interviews themselves consisted of twenty-eight open-ended questions, all related to the main themes being analyzed. The guide was developed and refined throughout April and May 2023, and a test interview was conducted at the end of May to validate its effectiveness.

The sampling technique used in this study was theoretical sampling. The process of idealizing the interviewees' profiles focused on being able to bring together individuals with different sociodemographic characteristics that would confer heterogeneity to the sample. We obtained a positive response from ten individuals, who ended up being considered participants in the final sample (Table 1). The interviews were carried out remotely, via Zoom and WhatsApp, to speed up the process, subject to the availability of the interviewees, in the first two weeks of June 2023, with an average duration of 30 to 45 minutes.

In a series of interviews, individuals from diverse backgrounds were profiled based on their age, gender, academic qualifications, residence, restaurant positions, industry experience, and current jobs. The first interviewee was a 25-year-old female with a master's degree, residing in Vila Nova de Gaia. She had five years of industry experience as a waitress and bartender and is currently working as a secretary. The second interviewee was a 26-year-old male from Castelo Branco, holding a bachelor's degree. He had worked as a chef for five years but is currently unemployed. The third interviewee was a 37-year-old female from Maia, also with a bachelor's degree, having eight years of industry experience in various restaurant roles such as kitchen assistant, dishwasher, waitress, and restaurant supervisor. Her current job is as a lawyer. The fourth interviewee was a 46-year-old female from Vila Nova de Gaia, who completed a professional/technical course. She had 25 years of industry experience and served as a waitress and restaurant manager and worked as a board assistant. The fifth interviewee was a 46-year-old male from Viseu with a Middle School education, having five years of experience as a waiter, restaurant manager, and owner. Nowadays he is a tailor. The sixth interviewee was a 35-year-old female from Águeda, holding a bachelor's degree and having six years of experience as a waitress. Her current job is as a production technician. The seventh interviewee was a 27-year-old male from Matosinhos, with a Middle School education, who had ten years of experience as a waiter and bartender in the food service sector and now works as a shipping assistant. The eighth interviewee was a 42-year-old female from Porto with a bachelor's degree, possessing 23 years of experience in roles such as a waitress, bartender, and restaurant manager, while is currently employed as a pharmacy technician. The ninth interviewee was a 25-year-old male from Porto with a master's degree, having ten years of experience as a waiter and bartender and currently working as a financial controller. Finally, the tenth interviewee was a 39-year-old male from Barreiro with a bachelor's degree, holding 14 years of industry experience, having assumed positions as a waiter, bartender, and restaurant manager. Today he is an entrepreneur.

To conduct the qualitative data analysis, a thematic analysis approach was employed. This involved identifying and examining patterns, or themes, within the qualitative data sets (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The aim was to synthesize the content of the interviews while also interpreting the main characteristics of the data as it pertains to the research question (Clarke and Braun, 2017). The results were then subjected to empirical saturation, which is the point at which no new themes or codes emerge from the analysis. Theoretical saturation, on the other hand, refers to the point at which additional data produces little or no change in the codebook (Guest *et al.*, 2006, p.65). With these considerations in mind, the qualitative study results were analyzed and interpreted.

#### 4. Results

Two dimensions of analysis were identified: Special Features of the Restaurant Sector and Attraction and Retention Strategies. By examining the intersection of these dimensions, we have uncovered subcategories that provide a more focused view of the participants' viewpoints. The "Special Features of the Restaurant Sector" theme encompasses all aspects that define and challenge the current state of the industry in Portugal, based on

insights from former professionals in the field who participated in our study. We will also delve into the impact that these challenges have had on employees. This theme serves as a foundation for the next section and offers a comprehensive understanding of the industry from those who know it best. We have identified four categories that fall under this theme: activity context, company type, the COVID-19 pandemic, and reasons for employee turnover (Table 1). The "Contextualization of the Activity" category presents the restaurant sector through the eyes of former employees. This introductory section provides insight into their viewpoint regarding their past experiences. It includes five subcategories: exhausting work, ease of employment, passion for the job, immigration, and perception of the experience. "Company Typology" is a category that examines the differences in complexity, intensity, and work pace that affect the attraction and retention of employees in catering companies. The "COVID-19 Pandemic" category focuses on the pandemic's impact on the sector, with subcategories including the effects on the industry, insecurity, and adaptation. The "Abandonment Factors" category emerged as a prevalent theme in interviews, with seven subcategories, including workload, insufficient remuneration, lack of working conditions, lack of career opportunities, lack of recognition, lack of personal time, and demotivation. Based on the interviews, these factors contribute to HR abandonment in restaurant companies in Portugal. Moreover, it is known that the pandemic and company type significantly impact this category. The pandemic caused instability, insecurity, and forced layoffs, leading many to abandon the sector. Many interviewees echoed this sentiment, citing the pandemic as a catalyst for change in the restaurant industry.

**Table 1: Theme, categories and subcategories of the “Special Features of the Restaurant Sector” analysis dimension**

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
1. Special Features of the Restaurant Sector	1.1. Activity context	a) Exhausting
		b) Easy employment
		c) Passion
		d) Immigration
		e) Perception of the experience
	1.2. Company Type	f) Differences in complexity
		g) Intensity and work pace
	1.3. COVID-19 pandemic	h) Impact generated
		i) Insecurity
		j) Reinvention
	1.4. Turnover factors	k) Working hours
		l) Insufficient remuneration
		m) Lack of working conditions
n) Lack of career opportunities		
o) Lack of recognition		
p) Lack of personal time		
q) Demotivation		

The second theme explores attraction and retention strategies for restaurant companies from the perspective of former employees. It offers suggestions for HRM implementation and highlights challenges faced in practice. The theme is organized into five categories: recruitment and selection, compensation and benefits, reception, integration and socialization, and career management and challenges (Table 2). Some of these strategies are already in use by certain companies, while others are potential areas for improvement in the sector. The category of "Recruitment and Selection" encompasses the primary methods that companies use to hire new talent, as perceived from the perspective of job applicants. This category includes two subcategories, namely personal contacts and social networks. Similarly, the "Compensation and Benefits" category stems from several subcategories aimed at providing attractive compensation packages and other benefits to potential employees, while simultaneously retaining top talent. Five subcategories were identified in this dimension, including salary, schedules, days off, overtime payment, and health insurance. The "Welcome, Integration, and Socialization" category focuses on the practices used by restaurants to welcome and integrate new employees and promote a positive work environment. The "Career Management" category is comprised of two subcategories, investment

in employee development and career progression. This category provides a comprehensive overview of the personal and professional growth opportunities offered by restaurant companies. Lastly, the "Challenges" category highlights the difficulties that companies face when it comes to attracting and retaining employees, as reported by former employees. This category includes three subcategories, specifically rethinking recruitment and selection, lack of qualified labour, and lack of strategic planning.

**Table 2: Theme, categories and subcategories of the “Attraction and Retention Strategies” analysis dimension**

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
2. Attraction and Retention Strategies	2.1. Recruitment and selection	r) Personal contacts
		s) Social networks
	2.2. Compensation and benefits	t) Salary
		u) Schedules
		v) Days off
		w) Overtime payment
		x) Health insurance
	2.3. Reception, integration and socialization	y) Welcome into the company
		z) Socialization
	2.4. Career management	aa) Investment in employee development
		bb) Career progression
	2.5. Challenges	cc) Rethinking recruitment and selection
		dd) Lack of qualified labour
ee) Lack of strategic planning		

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our study focused on the attraction and retention processes within restaurant companies. Participants expressed that there seemed to be a lack of structured and thoughtful processes in place if any at all. When it comes to recruitment and selection, our findings suggest that social networks and personal contacts are best for publicizing vacancies. Currently, recruitment seems ineffective in capturing a sufficient number of people to meet process needs (Almeida, 2014), and former employees feel that these processes are practically non-existent. Welcome and integration practices are crucial in creating a positive impact of the company on newly arrived employees, as argued by Byford *et al.* (2017), and in promoting satisfaction and retention (Robbins and Judge, 2021). In terms of rewards, former employees discussed the inclusion of attraction and retention strategies through more direct hours, rotating days off, and health insurance as the most important factors. We agree with Armstrong's (2009) understanding that the remuneration variable is extremely important for workers, as our results support this notion. The decision to stay within a company is no longer solely determined by monthly remuneration or monetary compensation. Rather, relational benefits that promote professional and personal balance and, consequently, a better quality of life are increasingly valued by employees. To retain their talent, companies must prioritize the development and progression of their employees' skills and individual qualities, as well as invest in their training. As such, it is HRM's responsibility to understand the needs and desires of their employees to provide a middle ground in which both sides can benefit. This involves developing strategies that increase the satisfaction of their employees, while also creating a healthy culture and environment that guarantees a sense of belonging, loyalty, and commitment to the company. While the restaurant industry presents unique challenges that may directly influence a company's ability to attract and retain talent, effective strategic planning can mitigate these particularities and make the sector more attractive to potential employees. Companies must recognize the importance of strategic planning and invest in it to overcome the barriers imposed by the characteristics of the sector. Our research highlights the organizational role in this industry and shows that the lack of strategic planning exacerbates the challenges that companies face. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasized the need for effective strategies to retain talent in the sector. Companies must recognize these challenges and implement effective strategies to ensure the stability and quality of their workforce. In summary, companies must prioritize their employees' needs and invest in their development and progression to ensure social sustainability and a stable workforce.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights that can help companies in the restaurant sector improve their HR practices and significantly impact practice. Adopting the best practices identified in this study can help companies distinguish themselves as preferred employers in the sector. By taking into account employee perspectives on attraction and retention processes, companies can adjust their approaches based on feedback and meet employee expectations and needs. HRM can take proactive steps to reduce turnover by recognizing the challenges companies face in attracting and retaining employees. This may include creating clear career development plans, providing opportunities for growth and development, and creating a work environment that values employees and increases their satisfaction. While our study had some limitations, such as difficulty finding former employees who met specific requirements, future studies could expand the participant pool to other regions, types of companies, and international contexts. It could also be beneficial to include current professionals in the sector and compare their perceptions to those of former employees. Additionally, extending the research to other sectors like the hotel industry can provide insights into whether the reality portrayed in restaurants is similar in other fields and the impact on more established companies.

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