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IMPACT OF EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND SAFETY PRACTICES ON TURNOVER IN THE SELECTED CITY COUNCILS: A STUDY OF MBALE AND JINJA, EASTERN UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between employee health and safety practices and turnover rates in Ugandan city councils, focusing on Mbale and Jinja municipalities. Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, data were collected from 341 public sector employees through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative analysis revealed moderate implementation of health and safety protocols (mean = 2.86/5), with critical deficits in protective equipment provision (73% unmet needs) and annual safety training (68% non-compliance). Correlation analysis demonstrated a strong inverse relationship between health/safety practices and turnover intentions (r=−0.719r = -0.719r=−0.719, p<0.01p < 0.01p<0.01), while linear regression indicated that health and safety measures accounted for 51.6% of turnover variance (β=−0.719\beta = -0.719β=−0.719, p<0.01p < 0.01p<0.01). Qualitative findings highlighted systemic failures in hazard mitigation and policy enforcement, exacerbating attrition risks. Grounded in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, the results position health and safety as critical hygiene factors in low-resource public sector contexts. These findings underscore the urgency of institutionalizing occupational safety standards to mitigate turnover in Uganda's local governments.

Keywords: Employee turnover, Occupational safety, Public sector, Uganda, Hygiene factors

INTRODUCTION

Employee health and safety in the workplace is more than just a checklist item—it fundamentally shapes how workers feel about their jobs and whether they choose to stay or leave. In many resource-limited settings, such as the city councils in Mbale and Jinja, basic safety provisions like timely delivery of protective gear and regular safety training aren't always a given. This has a profound effect on employee retention, as the absence of these basic measures contributes to job dissatisfaction and ultimately higher turnover rates.

Research in the field has long recognized that the physical conditions of a workplace play a crucial role in employee satisfaction. For instance, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959) makes a clear distinction between hygiene factors—like working conditions and safety—and motivators, such as recognition and opportunities for growth. When hygiene factors are compromised, as seen in situations where workers receive minimal protective equipment, the resulting dissatisfaction can lead to a significant increase in turnover. This is particularly relevant in contexts where employees face daily hazards without adequate protection.

Similarly, the concept of job embeddedness, as detailed by Mitchell et al. (2001), suggests that the strength of an employee's connection to their workplace depends not only on the rewards and recognition they receive but also on the everyday practicalities of their working environment. When basic safety protocols are lacking, it disrupts the very fabric of these connections—links that might otherwise keep employees tied to their organization even in the face of challenges.

In addition to these foundational theories, other studies offer valuable insights. Ali and Anwar (2017) have shown that while financial incentives are important, they must be coupled with non-financial elements—such as a safe and supportive working environment—to effectively reduce turnover. This view is echoed by Khan and Malik (2017), who argue that investments in workplace safety yield significant returns by enhancing employee loyalty and reducing the substantial costs associated with high turnover. Moreover, Zhang and Morris (2021) provide evidence that consistent, non-financial rewards, including investments in safety infrastructure, have a lasting impact on employee retention compared to one-off financial bonuses.

What emerges from this body of research is a clear message: improving workplace safety isn't merely a regulatory or ethical requirement; it is a strategic imperative that can lead to a more stable and motivated workforce. For municipalities operating under tight budgets, even modest investments in health and safety measures can translate into a significant reduction in turnover-related costs. More importantly, such improvements foster an environment where employees feel valued, secure, and genuinely supported in their daily work.

In summary, these findings urge policymakers and local government administrators to prioritize investments in basic health and safety practices. Regular safety audits, adequate provision of protective equipment, and tailored training programs are not just improvements in operational protocol—they are essential steps toward building a more committed and effective workforce. By addressing these core issues, city councils can create safer, more stable working environments that ultimately benefit both employees and the broader community.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959) provides the primary framework for understanding how workplace conditions influence employee retention. The theory distinguishes between *motivators* (e.g., recognition, achievement) and *hygiene factors* (e.g., safety, salary), positing that inadequate hygiene factors directly cause dissatisfaction and turnover, even when motivators are present1. In sub-Saharan African contexts, Mwesigwa (2018) validated this model, demonstrating that Ugandan public workers prioritized physical safety over career advancement, with 62% citing hazardous conditions as their primary resignation motive.

Complementing this, Mitchell et al.'s (2001) Job Embeddedness Theory emphasizes how workplace "fit" and "links" influence retention. However, cross-cultural studies by Nkosi (2020) revealed that resource-constrained environments diminish embeddedness effects, as employees prioritize basic safety over organizational ties—a critical consideration for Ugandan municipalities.

Empirical Evidence on Health/Safety and Turnover

Globally, robust evidence links occupational safety to retention. A meta-analysis by Clarke (2013) spanning 23 countries found that workplaces with certified safety programs experienced 31% lower turnover. However, implementation disparities persist in developing nations: the International Labour Organization (2019) reported that only 18% of sub-Saharan African public institutions comply with basic occupational safety standards.

In Uganda's specific context, the Occupational Safety and Health Act (2006) mandates employer responsibilities, yet enforcement remains inconsistent. A 2022 audit of Jinja City Council revealed that 88% of departments lacked functional hazard reporting systems1, creating environments where 74% of sanitation workers reported injury-related absenteeism (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2023). These conditions align with Kassegwa's (2021) finding that Ugandan public sector employees in high-risk roles exhibited 2.3× higher turnover rates than their low-risk counterparts.

Contextual Challenges in Ugandan Municipalities

Three interrelated factors exacerbate health/safety challenges in Mbale and Jinja:

Resource Constraints: Municipal safety budgets average $0.83 per employee annually1, compared to the WHO's recommended $18 minimum for basic protective gear.

Training Gaps: Only 12% of employees receive annual safety training1, contrasting sharply with South Africa's 58% compliance rate (Nkosi, 2020).

Cultural Perceptions: Qualitative studies by Mugerwa (2022) found that 81% of Ugandan managers viewed safety expenditures as discretionary rather than mandatory, perpetuating systemic underinvestment.

These realities create a paradox: while national legislation exists, localized implementation failures transform legal mandates into theoretical constructs rather than operational practices.

Gaps in Existing Research

Prior studies exhibit three limitations:

Overemphasis on Formal Sector: Research disproportionately focuses on multinational corporations, neglecting public sector dynamics (Kakuru, 2020).

Methodological Narrowness: 78% of Ugandan turnover studies employ purely quantitative designs (Tumwesigye, 2021), overlooking contextual nuances captured through mixed methods.

Temporal Limitations: No longitudinal studies track the long-term impacts of safety investments on retention in East Africa.

This study addresses these gaps by combining psychometric scales with ethnographic interviews within a municipal context, providing both statistical rigor and qualitative depth.

Synthesis and Conceptual Positioning

The literature converges on two key insights:

1. Health/safety practices function as threshold variables—their absence triggers dissatisfaction, but their presence alone does not guarantee retention (Herzberg, 1959).
2. Cultural and economic factors mediate safety perceptions; Ugandan employees prioritize immediate physical protections over psychosocial safety measures emphasized in Western studies (Wataka Willies, 2025).

These findings necessitate context-specific theoretical models that account for resource limitations and institutional capacities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to investigate the relationship between employee health and safety practices and turnover in Mbale and Jinja City Councils. The quantitative phase employed a cross-sectional survey to quantify associations between variables, followed by qualitative interviews to contextualize statistical findings. This approach aligned with the pragmatist paradigm, emphasizing practical solutions to real-world problems (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Data Collection

Target Population and Sampling

The study targeted 380 permanent employees across both city councils, stratified into administrative (35%), technical (45%), and support staff (20%). Using Krejcie and Morgan’s (1970) sample size table, a representative sample of 341 participants was selected through proportional stratified random sampling (Jinja: 175; Mbale: 166). For qualitative data, 15 key informants (HR managers, safety officers, union representatives) were purposively sampled based on their institutional safety oversight roles.

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Instruments

Quantitative: A 28-item questionnaire was measured:

- *Health and Safety Practices* (12 items, α = 0.84): Protective equipment provision, safety training frequency, hazard reporting efficacy.
- *Turnover Intentions* (5-point Likert scale, α = 0.89): Adapted from Mobley's (1982) turnover intention scale.

Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews explored:

- Barriers to safety protocol implementation
- Employee perceptions of workplace risks
- Institutional accountability mechanisms

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative Analysis

Data were processed in SPSS v28 using:

1. **Descriptive Statistics**: Means and frequencies assessed health/safety implementation levels.

2. **Inferential Statistics**:
   - Pearson's correlation (rrr) tested health/safety–turnover relationships.
   - Linear regression modeled health/safety practices as predictors of turnover (R2R^2R2, β\betaβ coefficients).
   - Factor analysis (Varimax rotation) confirmed construct validity.

Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis in NVivo 12:

1. **Coding**: Open coding identified 37 initial codes (e.g., "PPE shortages," "training gaps").
2. **Theme Development**: Axial coding grouped codes into themes:
   - Systemic resource constraints
   - Policy–practice disconnects
   - Cultural normalization of hazards

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to Kampala International University's research ethics guidelines:

1) **Informed Consent**: Participants received forms detailing study objectives and anonymity assurances.
2) **Confidentiality**: Data were anonymized (e.g., "Respondent J03") and stored on encrypted devices.
3) **Beneficence**: Findings were shared with city councils to inform safety policy reforms.

Methodological Rigor

1. **Reliability**: Questionnaire reliability was confirmed through:
   - Pilot testing (n = 30, α > 0.7 for all scales)
   - Inter-rater checks on 10% of qualitative codes (Cohen's κ = 0.81)
2. **Validity**:
   - Content Validity Index (CVI = 0.89) via expert panel review
   - Method triangulation strengthened interpretation credibility

Limitations

1) **Geographic Specificity**: Findings reflect Uganda's municipal contexts; generalizability to private sector requires caution.
2) **Self-Report Bias**: Turnover intentions may not fully predict actual attrition.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Reward Management

Analysis of 341 responses revealed moderate implementation of reward systems (mean = 3.12/5). Only 29% of employees reported receiving performance-based bonuses, while 67% cited delayed salary payments as a recurring issue. A weak but significant inverse correlation emerged between reward satisfaction and turnover intentions (r=−0.312r = -0.312r=−0.312, p<0.05p < 0.05p<0.05), with regression models explaining 9.7% of turnover variance (R2=0.097R^2 = 0.097R2=0.097, F(1,339)=36.8F(1,339) = 36.8F(1,339)=36.8, p<0.001p < 0.001p<0.001)1.

Career Growth Management

Career development opportunities scored lowest among HR practices (mean = 2.45/5). Critical gaps included:

- 82% reported no formal promotion criteria
- 79% lacked access to skill-building workshops

  Correlation with turnover was stronger than rewards (r=−0.498r = -0.498r=−0.498, p<0.01p < 0.01p<0.01), with career growth accounting for 24.8% of attrition variance (β=−0.498\beta = -0.498β=−0.498)1.

Employee Health and Safety

As hypothesized, health/safety practices showed the strongest association with turnover. Descriptive statistics highlighted systemic failures:

- 73% lacked adequate personal protective equipment (PPE)
- 68% received no annual safety training
- 81% reported non-functional hazard reporting systems

  A robust negative correlation emerged (r=−0.719r = -0.719r=−0.719, p<0.01p < 0.01p<0.01), with regression explaining 51.6% of turnover variance (R2=0.516R^2 = 0.516R2=0.516, β=−0.719\beta = -0.719β=−0.719)1.

Employee Motivation

Composite motivation scores averaged 2.94/5. Only 24% agreed that supervisors recognized their contributions. Motivation correlated moderately with turnover (r=−0.402r = -0.402r=−0.402, p<0.01p < 0.01p<0.01), contributing 16.1% explanatory power (R2=0.161R^2 = 0.161R2=0.161)1.

Multivariate Analysis

A hierarchical regression model incorporating all four predictors explained 58.3% of turnover variance (R2=0.583R^2 = 0.583R2=0.583). Health/safety practices dominated the model (β=−0.682\beta = -

0.682β=−0.682), followed by career growth (β=−0.294\beta = -0.294β=−0.294)1.

Qualitative Insights

Interviews with 15 HR managers and employees revealed contextual challenges:

“We’ve had the same PPE budget since 2018, despite inflation doubling equipment costs.” Procurement Officer, Jinja1

“Promotions depend on who you know, not performance.” Administrative Staff, Mbale1

Discussion

Reconciling Findings with Theoretical Frameworks

The results strongly validate **Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory** in low-resource settings. Health/safety practices emerged as non-negotiable hygiene factors—their absence triggered disproportionate dissatisfaction, consistent with Mwesigwa’s (2018) Ugandan municipal studies1. However, the weak predictive power of rewards (9.7% variance) contrasts with Western models where compensation dominates turnover models (Clarke, 2013), suggesting cultural prioritization of basic safety over monetary incentives.

Health/Safety as Primary Attrition Driver

The 51.6% explanatory power of health/safety measures exceeds prior African studies (e.g., Nkosi’s 37% in South Africa, 2020), likely due to Uganda’s acute resource constraints. Employees perceived inadequate PPE not merely as an inconvenience but as institutional neglect, eroding trust and commitment. This aligns with **Psychological Contract Theory**—breaches in perceived employer obligations catalyze exits (Rousseau, 1995).

Intersectional Resource and Policy Failures

Three compounding factors exacerbated turnover:

1) **Budgetary Neglect**: Municipal safety allocations ($0.83/employee) covered just 4.6% of WHO-recommended expenditures1.
2) **Accountability Gaps**: 88% of departments lacked safety compliance audits, enabling managerial apathy.
3) **Skill Deficits**: Only 12% of supervisors received OSHA compliance training, impairing policy implementation.

These systemic issues create self-reinforcing cycles—high turnover reduces institutional capacity to address safety gaps, further accelerating attrition.

Motivation-Retention Paradox

Despite moderate motivation scores (2.94/5), its limited predictive power (16.1%) suggests that even motivated employees exit when safety fundamentals falter. This contradicts **Job Embeddedness Theory**, which posits that motivated workers develop stronger organizational ties (Mitchell et al., 2001). In Mbale and Jinja, embeddedness collapses when basic physiological/safety needs remain unmet.

Comparative Analysis with Global Literature

The dominance of health/safety factors mirrors trends in other resource-constrained public sectors:

- India: Joshi (2021) found 54% of municipal exits linked to hazardous working conditions.
- Brazil: Silva et al. (2020) reported 63% turnover reduction after PPE investments.

However, Uganda's combination of budgetary constraints and weak enforcement presents unique challenges requiring context-specific solutions.

Conclusion

Key Findings

1) Health/safety practices are the primary determinant of turnover in Ugandan municipalities, explaining 51.6% of variance.
2) Career growth and motivation exhibit moderate effects, while reward systems show minimal impact.
3) Systemic underfunding, skill gaps, and accountability failures perpetuate hazardous work environments.

Recommendations

1) **Policy Reform**: Amend the Occupational Safety Act (2006) to mandate minimum 5% municipal budgets for PPE and training.
2) **Capacity Building**: Train HR teams in OSHA compliance, targeting 100% supervisory certification within 18 months.
3) **Monitoring Frameworks**: Implement quarterly safety audits with public scorecards to enhance transparency.

Future Research Directions

1) Longitudinal studies tracking retention impacts of safety investments over 5–10 years.
2) Cross-national comparisons of sub-Saharan African municipalities to identify best practices.
3) Cost-benefit analyses of attrition reduction versus safety program costs.

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