



# UNDERSTANDING RETENTION DYNAMICS: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RED-CIRCLED EMPLOYEES

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**Abstract:** This study delved into the experiences of red-circled employees within educational institutions in Qatar, focusing on the challenges and opportunities encountered throughout their professional journeys. The theoretical basis of this study is Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, also referred to as the Motivation-Hygiene Theory. The theory states that job satisfaction and motivation in the workplace are influenced by two main groups of factors: motivators and hygiene factors. Utilizing the framework of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the research employed a Transcendental Phenomenological design, conducting in-depth interviews with red-circled employees within an educational setting. Employing a purposeful sampling strategy based on tenure and roles, data collection is carried out through qualitative interviews, with thematic analysis used for data interpretation, supplemented by detailed notes and reflections taken after each interview. The findings revealed six insightful themes, including strategies for navigating career stagnation through intrinsic motivation, the importance of fostering a supportive work environment through extrinsic factors, addressing critical hygiene factors such as compensation and job security, and supporting basic needs and well-being, and highlighted the structure, culture, recognition, and benefits and the employee retention in the Qatar educational sector. Synthesizing these findings underscores the significance of personal fulfillment derived from work among red-circled employees, alongside the value of cultivating supportive organizational cultures. However, challenges related to stagnant compensation and limited career progression remain pervasive. Recommendations are offered, advocating for implementing targeted retention strategies and cultivating organizational cultures prioritizing employee well-being and development.

**Keywords:** lived experiences, red-circled employees, hygiene factors, retention strategies

## I. INTRODUCTION

Employee retention is vital for the stability and success of educational institutions. In Qatar's higher education sector, the migration of qualified staff to the private sector and other institutions due to better rewards and benefits poses significant challenges (Younis et al., 2023). Key factors influencing attrition include dissatisfaction with career advancement, demographic changes, emotional constraints, and inadequate compensation (Amin & Cochrane, 2023; Elsafty & Sayed, 2023; Nebriada et al., 2022; Awolusi & Jayakody, 2022).

Among these factors, the phenomenon of "red-circled employees" is particularly concerning. These employees remain in the same roles for extended periods without career advancement or salary increases, primarily due to budget constraints or other limitations (SHRM, 2023). This situation leads to frustration and demotivation, causing them to seek opportunities elsewhere, which further exacerbates retention issues.

Existing research has identified various challenges associated with employee retention, but there has been limited focus on the lived experiences, motivations, and coping mechanisms of red-circled employees, particularly within Qatar's education sector. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing targeted strategies that enhance job satisfaction and reduce turnover rates.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of red-circled employees in Qatar's higher education institutions. The findings are expected to inform the development of effective retention strategies and provide valuable insights for policymakers, education leaders, and human resource professionals. By addressing the specific needs and challenges of these employees, educational institutions can enhance employee retention and ensure long-term sustainability.

### *Purpose of the Study*

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of red-circled employees on the retention phenomenon. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of red-circled employees on overall work, including motivator factors such as recognition and personal growth?
2. What roles do hygiene factors play in the decisions of red-circled employees to retain or leave their current position?
3. How do the insights and lived experiences of red-circled employees contribute to developing effective targeted retention strategies within the educational sector in Qatar?

## **II. METHODS**

### *Research Design*

This study employs a transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the retention phenomenon through the lived experiences of red-circled employees. According to Moustakas (1994), it offers a systematic framework for analyzing the data on lived experiences. This approach proved particularly well-suited to the research objectives that allowed the researcher to perceive the phenomenon freshly and, in its totality, enabling a deeper understanding of the meaning attributed to retention experiences by red-circled employees. This facilitates a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences, focusing on the "how" and "what" of their retention experiences. By prioritizing participants' own narratives over pre-existing research, this methodology ensures that the stories are heard directly from the source, aligning with the principles of human science research.

### *Participants*

In this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study, the participants were employees from a private international school in Doha, State of Qatar, which follows the British curriculum. The focus was on the lived experiences of red-circled employees in relation to the retention phenomenon, aiming to gain valuable insights within the educational context. The intent of this transcendental phenomenology was an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon (Hong & Cross Francis, 2020) rather than representing the study population. Therefore, the exact number of participants was not predetermined. The focus was on achieving data completeness through theoretical saturation rather than the number of interviews or participants (Hennink et al., 2019). The objective was to continue data collection until no new information or themes emerged from the interviews. This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences and practices of the red-circled employees in the region.

### *Sampling Procedure*

The researcher employed purposive sampling, a non-probability method, to select participants based on specific criteria aligned with the study's objectives. Criteria included age (30-55), current educator role (working 40 hours/week), tenure of at least three years, prior receipt of financial incentive within three years, and signing a consent form. This method ensured the recruitment of educators likely to offer rich insights into retention dynamics within the organization, considering their experience, engagement, and firsthand familiarity with incentive programs.

### *Data Collection Method*

To explore the lived experiences of red-circled employees within the private educational institution of Qatar, this transcendental phenomenology study employed a comprehensive multi-method approach to data collection. Primarily, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a select group of red-circled teaching staff, guided by a protocol developed from the research objectives and themes derived from the literature review. The semi-structured format provided participants with flexibility to articulate their experiences, perspectives, and reflections authentically. Open-ended questions facilitated detailed responses, encouraging participants to discuss their professional responsibilities, encountered challenges, and pivotal moments influencing their decisions to remain or depart from the organization. Further probing questions were strategically utilized to ensure depth and clarity within their narratives. To ensure accuracy in representation and analysis, all interviews were meticulously audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In addition to interviews, document analysis was employed to supplement the insights collected from participant narratives. Examination of private documents such as HR reports and employee development policies provided a broader contextual framework. Integration of document analysis enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the study by triangulating data from multiple sources.

Descriptive field notes were also instrumental in capturing observations extending beyond verbal communication. The researcher meticulously documented nonverbal cues, including body language, not discernible in recorded interviews, enriching the overall dataset.

Data collection occurred through an online platform that empowered participants to choose a convenient date and time for their subsequent Zoom interview. Before the data collection, ethical considerations were obtained from relevant institutional committees to safeguard participants' rights and privacy. Informed consent was secured from each participant, outlining their voluntary participation, the investigation's objectives, and the confidentiality measures upheld throughout the study.

### *Data Analysis*

The researcher followed a rigorous and systematic approach to extract valuable insights from the gathered data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994). Here's how the researcher ensured the themes captured the lived experiences of the red-circled employees:

1. Familiarization. The researcher immersed in the data by repeatedly reviewing and listening to the transcripts. This initial stage involved getting a thorough understanding of the data and identifying preliminary patterns and themes.

2. Open Coding. The researcher meticulously examined the transcripts line by line, assigning codes to concepts and categories that emerged organically from the participants' own words. This process was free from preconceived notions about retention strategies, ensuring the themes were grounded in the data.
3. Identifying Themes. The researcher organized the codes into potential themes that summarized sections of the data relevant to our research questions. This involved clustering codes based on similarities and differences, constantly refining the thematic framework.
4. Reviewing Themes. The researcher carefully reviewed the identified themes against the coded segments and transcripts. This ensured the themes were relevant, aligned with the research questions, and didn't exhibit redundancy or overlap. If necessary, themes were merged or combined for better clarity.
5. Defining & Naming Themes. The researcher assigned clear and descriptive names to the final themes, ensuring they accurately reflected the content they represented and directly addressed the research questions.
6. Writing Up Analysis. This was a recursive process where we revisited the initial analysis stages to refine the themes and ensure they comprehensively captured the participants' experiences. The researcher utilized data triangulation to further validate the analysis by conducting consistent field transcript audits to identify patterns.
7. Ensuring Theme Accuracy. Throughout the process, the researcher employed several strategies to guarantee the themes accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences:
8. Member Checking. While not always feasible in qualitative research, the researcher aimed to involve participants, if possible, in reviewing the identified themes to ensure their perspectives were accurately represented.
9. Reflective Memoing. The researcher kept detailed memos throughout the analysis process, documenting our thoughts, decisions, and any potential biases to maintain transparency and revisit them if needed.
10. Rich Quotations. The researcher incorporated rich and illustrative quotes from the participants within the identified themes in the final report. This allowed readers to see how the themes emerged directly from the participants' own words and experiences.

This transcendental approach took a step further by initiating a phenomenological investigation where the researcher consciously suspends preconceived notions and employs systematic procedures to analyze the gathered data. This suspension of judgment, known as "epoché," is derived from the Greek word to abstain from making judgments.

Consequently, the transcendental process allowed the researcher to perceive the phenomenon with a fresh perspective, as if encountering it for the first time, and remain receptive to its entirety. A systematic and rigorous approach to analyzing transcendental phenomenological data remains accessible to qualitative researchers, as outlined by Moustakas (1994):

a) The researcher then starts by bracketing or epoché, which is crucial for focusing on the phenomenon itself, setting aside his or her own experiences without being influenced by existing knowledge or biases about retention strategies for red-circled employees.

b) The researcher identified significant statements in the database from participants — a process known as "horizontalization." The transcripts were carefully examined to identify specific statements that provide insights into the participants' experiences to understand the various perspectives surrounding the phenomenon comprehensively.

c) After identifying the significant statements, the researcher clustered them into themes or categories based on their similarities and differences. Initially, all significant statements were considered to be of equal value. During this process, irrelevant or redundant statements that do not contribute to the topic were excluded. The remaining statements represent the horizons or textual meanings.

d) Finally, a synthesis was created by combining the textual and structural descriptions to effectively convey the essence of participants' experiences with the identified phenomenon. Textualization involves creating a detailed description of phenomena and their essential qualities.

By intertwining the identified themes and narratives, the researcher constructed a cohesive and comprehensive representation of the lived experiences of the red-circled employees in an educational institution in Qatar. The results were presented using rich and illustrative quotes from the participants to enhance the authenticity and depth of the findings.

### III. RESULTS

This transcendental phenomenology provides a thorough examination of the experiences of "red-circled" employees in private international schools. The analysis revealed six overarching themes and sixteen distinct categories, supported by 104 codes. The focus was on factors influencing professional satisfaction and retention, including recognition, opportunities for growth, and hygiene factors. The insights gained highlight the need for tailored retention strategies that address the specific needs of red-circled employees, ultimately contributing to enhanced job satisfaction and organizational resilience.

#### *Theme 1: Navigating Career Stagnation Through Intrinsic Motivation*

Red-circled employees navigated career stagnation through intrinsic motivation, drawing upon personal fulfillment, professional growth, and challenges in career progression. They derived a sense of achievement from their work, finding meaning in making a positive impact and contributing to their organization's success. They actively engaged in professional growth initiatives, seeking opportunities for skill enhancement and advancement. However, they faced challenges such as stagnant compensation and limited opportunities for advancement. Despite these obstacles, they leveraged intrinsic motivators, finding fulfillment in their contributions and pursuing personal and professional growth amidst the constraints they faced. This blend of intrinsic motivation and resilience enabled them to strive for fulfillment and success in their careers.

Based on interviews, professional growth and development emerged as significant themes, with participants expressing a strong desire to make a positive impact as long-term staff members. Ms. Isadora Frost highlighted the importance of continuity and familiarity in fostering meaningful contributions, stating, "I stay because I want to make an impact and I think particularly as a teacher and particularly in the international setting you need a year at least to get used to the school and the children and the country." Participants also discussed growth opportunities for career advancement within their organizations, emphasizing the dynamic nature of their roles and the availability of diverse experiences for professional development.

### *Theme 2: Cultivating a Supportive Work Environment Through Extrinsic Factors*

Creating a supportive work environment involves recognizing and valuing employee contributions, offering commitment and support, and addressing workload and compensation concerns. Ms. Marigold Stone elaborates on the necessity of fairness and transparency in compensation, stating, "Perception counts for a lot because you know you might think that you know you and I are two people are doing the same job right? Why is one person being paid this and the other person is being paid." Ms. Elara Sinclair highlights the disheartening effect of perceived unfairness, "And I have been in previous girls where maybe it wasn't done so fairly. And and yeah it is quite disheartening when you hear of maybe you know there might be someone who doesn't have as much experience but you know they might be on a higher salary." Ensuring fair and transparent practices promotes trust and well-being among employees.

### *Theme 3: Perceptual Adequacy of Compensation and Job Security*

This theme examines the critical role of compensation and working conditions in shaping employees' perceptions of job satisfaction and security. Ms. Celestia Vala highlights a sense of being overlooked due to a focus on newly qualified teachers: "I think the focus is always on the newly qualified teachers that just come in um the teachers who have no experience. So sometimes you feel a little overlooked with this sense is because you don't get as much professional development." Ms. Octavia Finch echoes this sentiment, "Most of my experience has been a sense of overlooked." These feelings of being undervalued can lead to self-doubt and hinder career progression.

### *Theme 4: Work Environment that Supports Basic Needs and Well-Being*

Red-circled employees, those at the higher limit of their pay scale, face unique challenges. Ms. Marigold Stone articulates the juggling act of balancing work and further education, suggesting solutions like adjusting timetables: "...do we then tie that into their weekly timetable to say I will give you back an hour a week or two hours over fortnight just for study time you know that sort of thing. Can we make that happen?" This theme underscores the importance of recognizing development needs and creating a supportive environment to retain experienced employees.

### *Theme 5: Structure, Culture, Recognition, and Benefits in Red-Circled Employee Retention*

Personal fulfillment and satisfaction are deeply rooted in making a positive impact and experiencing professional growth. Ms. Marigold Stone highlights the gratification found in contributing to the school's success: "...being part of a team where we can see the impact in terms of the difference that we make to the children their learning being part of a family of schools where clearly ....continues to grow." Additionally, balancing career goals with current role satisfaction is crucial, as Ms. Isadora Frost notes, "I think it's about choosing the right opportunities to apply for. Um. So it's not that I don't have aspirations but sometimes like you want to stay." This theme emphasizes the intrinsic rewards and professional growth that contribute to overall satisfaction.

### *Theme 6: Employee Retention Strategies in the Qatar Educational Sector.*

Work-life balance and professional development are critical for employee satisfaction. Ms. Marigold Stone discusses the challenges of balancing work and further education: "...do we then tie that into their weekly timetable to say I will give you back an hour a week or two hours over fortnight just for study time you know that sort of thing. Can we make that happen?" This theme highlights the importance of addressing systemic issues to support employee well-being and satisfaction. Feelings of being overlooked and undervalued can lead to self-doubt, hindering career progression and straining relationships within the organization.

Red-circled employees (RCEs) navigate career stagnation amid salary caps and limited promotional prospects but remain driven by intrinsic motivation, finding purpose in their contributions to the school community. Their dedication to long-term impact and institutional success coexists with frustrations, emphasizing the need to recognize systemic barriers and foster a culture of growth and development.

RCEs prioritize both intrinsic and extrinsic factors in their pursuit of job satisfaction and retention, valuing financial security and a supportive work environment characterized by positive feedback and collaboration. Balancing professional growth with financial sustainability becomes crucial as they strive to thrive within their roles despite stagnant compensation and potential workload increases.

In Qatar's education sector, RCEs face similar challenges, emphasizing the importance of financial stability and career advancement opportunities. They also stress the significance of a supportive workplace culture that nurtures their passion for education, professional growth, and overall well-being. Educational institutions are urged to offer clear career progression paths, initiatives promoting work-life balance, and avenues for professional development to retain valuable talent and cultivate a committed workforce.

## **IV. DISCUSSIONS**

### *Summary of Findings*

The following are the findings regarding the lived experiences of the red-circled employees on the retention phenomenon of a private international school drawn from the interview and analysis conducted by the researcher. The findings are arranged based on the research questions:

The researcher explored the experiences of red-circled employees, investigating their overall work situation and the motivating factors driving their engagement. Despite facing challenges such as limited opportunities for career progression and stagnant compensation, these employees found fulfillment in their roles. They actively sought out avenues for professional growth, taking on leadership responsibilities, and engaging in self-directed learning to enhance their skills. Recognition and personal growth emerged as pivotal motivators for red-circled employees, who emphasized the importance of feeling valued and appreciated for their contributions. Leadership experiences further bolstered their confidence and provided opportunities for development, highlighting the multifaceted nature of their engagement with their work.

The study underscored the significance of hygiene factors such as salary, job security, and working conditions in influencing red-circled employees' decisions to stay or leave their positions. For employees earning salaries beyond their job pay ranges, feeling undervalued or stagnant in their roles became a pressing concern, prompting considerations of seeking better opportunities elsewhere. Limited prospects for career advancement compounded these issues, leading employees to perceive a lack of potential for growth and development within their current positions. Consequently, hygiene factors played a crucial role in shaping the

retention decisions of red-circled employees, emphasizing the need for organizations to address these factors to foster employee satisfaction and retention.

Moreover, the study highlighted the invaluable insights gleaned from the lived experiences of red-circled employees, particularly within the educational sector in Qatar. Their perspectives shed light on the challenges and opportunities present within the sector, informing the development of targeted retention strategies. Addressing concerns related to fair compensation structures, career growth opportunities, and employee engagement emerged as key focal points for organizational improvement. By aligning individual and institutional goals, implementing performance-based incentives, and fostering supportive environments, educational institutions can create conducive settings that promote employee satisfaction and enhance retention rates. Additionally, initiatives such as gathering employee feedback and offering benefits like housing assistance and flexible work schedules can further contribute to improving overall employee well-being and performance.

### *Implications*

The findings of this study have substantial implications for the practice and theory related to the lived experiences of red-circled employees in educational institutions in Qatar.

#### *Empirical Implication*

This research identified that, despite encountering limitations associated with reaching the maximum salary for the red-circled employees' positions and restricted pathways for conventional promotion, the participants still derived significance from their work and actively pursued opportunities for professional development. Moreover, recognition and a sense of purpose are highlighted as significant motivators. The research emphasizes the critical role of hygiene factors, such as competitive compensation and growth opportunities, in retaining red-circled employees. By understanding these employees' perspectives, educational institutions can develop targeted retention strategies that address both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. These strategies can encompass implementing performance-based rewards, ensuring fair compensation structures, and fostering a culture of employee engagement and professional development. Furthermore, acknowledging the value proposition of red-circled employees and implementing strategies that address their specific requirements can lead to the development of a more supportive work environment within educational institutions. This, in turn, has the potential to foster increased job satisfaction and enhance employee retention rates.

#### *Theoretical Implication*

The theoretical implications of this study are significant, as they contribute to several key areas of organizational behavior and human resource management theory. Firstly, the findings illuminate the concept of career stagnation and its subsequent influence on employee motivational states and levels of engagement. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory posits that hygiene factors, such as salary and job security, are essential for job satisfaction but may not inherently lead to motivation. This research suggests that for red-circled employees, these hygiene factors play a critical role in their decision-making processes regarding retention or departure. Secondly, the emphasis on motivator factors such as recognition and personal growth aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which posits that individuals are motivated by the fulfillment of higher-level needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization. Red-circled employees' desire for recognition and opportunities for personal growth highlights the importance of these factors in driving motivation and job satisfaction. Lastly, the study's focus on developing effective targeted retention strategies within the educational sector in Qatar contributes to the literature on employee retention and talent management. Through the recognition of the specific needs and challenges confronting red-circled employees, organizations possess the capacity to tailor retention strategies that directly address these factors. This targeted approach has the potential to cultivate enhanced employee satisfaction and, consequently, elevate organizational performance.

### *Conclusions*

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concluded that:

1. While red-circled employees face limitations in advancement and compensation, they find fulfillment through meaningful work and actively pursue personal growth opportunities. Their experiences highlight the continued importance of recognition, purpose, and development alongside competitive pay structures.
2. Neglecting hygiene factors like salary, job security, and growth opportunities can disproportionately impact red-circled employees, leading them to seek positions elsewhere that offer a more fulfilling work environment. Therefore, organizations must prioritize these factors alongside traditional compensation structures to retain their valuable, red-circled workforce.
3. Red-circled employees, while intrinsically motivated, highlight the need for fair compensation, growth opportunities, and recognition. Hence, addressing these concerns and fostering a culture of engagement within institutions can create a work environment that retains this valuable workforce.

### *Recommendations*

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher recommended that:

The Administrators, department leaders, and managers of educational institutions should consider offering non-monetary incentives such as professional development opportunities, recognition programs, and flexible work arrangements to maintain motivation and satisfaction among red-circled employees.

The Human Resources professionals should develop comprehensive career progression pathways that include targeted training, skill development, and leadership opportunities to help red-circled employees advance within the organization despite stagnant compensation.

Policymakers can encourage organizations to adopt transparent and equitable compensation practices that recognize and reward the contributions of red-circled employees, ensuring that their skills and experiences are appropriately valued.

The Red-circled Employees should engage in open communication with their supervisors about their goals and aspirations, seeking constructive feedback and recognition.

Future researchers should conduct a quantitative study to measure and determine the long-term effects of being a red-circled employee in terms of well-being, job satisfaction, and organizational performance to inform data-driven retention and development strategies.

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