SUSTAINABILITY IN HEALTHCARE: AN INVESTIGATION INTO DYNAMIC EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT, ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION

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ABSTRACT: *The healthcare industry is one of the largest and most complex industries with relatively low employee retention rates and multiple groups of professionals with divergent interests and requirements. Talent management strategies including employee retention have become increasingly important to the healthcare industry with already established deficits among groups of professionals. This study aims to evaluate the current employee retention practices in healthcare, factors affecting employee retention within the healthcare sector and sustainable measures ensuring dynamism of employee retention. This study uses secondary data and the systematic literature review methodology to answer the research questions. A total of 17 studies were included in the study based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study. Studies were collected and reviewed using the SALSA framework for systematic literature review and meta-analyses. This study included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research as well as observational and experimental studies. This study found that similar to other industries, factors that affect employee retention within organisations included reward and recognition, compensation and benefits, training and development, job flexibility and opportunities for career development. The most significant finding of this study includes mentorship, social capital, comprehensive orientation, decentralised education, recruitment process and employer branding as measures for sustainable employee retention within healthcare organisations.*

KEYWORDS: Recruitment, Engagement, Retention, Health, Current Practices.

BACKGROUND

Sustainability has gained increased traction in healthcare management due its central role in achieving effective and efficient healthcare systems within the last decade (Nicol, 2018). The healthcare workplace is a complex, multicultural and multidisciplinary setting with varying employee requirements and needs. Sustainability from a clinical perspective focuses on the proper allocation of resources including human and material resources to improve the overall health and wellbeing of the staff[1]. The healthcare staff constitute a significant resource for healthcare systems; thus, efficient management of the healthcare staff is necessary to ensure sustainable healthcare systems. The healthcare industry is under increased pressure to attract new employees, prevent burnouts, retain employees and provide quality healthcare services[2]. Employee recruitment, engagement and retention within the healthcare industry have been described by Stretton and Bolon (2009)[3] as important for the efficient management of the human resources within the healthcare system.

Employee recruitment, usually, is the first step in the management of human resources within any firm. Additionally, the healthcare industry is largely a service industry which emphasises the role of its human resources as central and important in quality service delivery. Furthermore, studies have proposed that the way employees are recruited influences the employee retention and attrition rates and thus, the overall performance of the organisation[4]. This is particularly important in healthcare as most of the services offered in the industry are controlled by human factors. Additionally, shortage of healthcare workers is a growing concern globally, the recruitment process for the healthcare industry is therefore a central process[5]. Employee recruitment has been considered to be internal or external. Internal recruitment occurs when employers recruit employees who currently operate within the hospital to fill existing vacancies. Conversely, external recruitment involves all the methods and processes employed by an employer to bring a vacancy to the notice of potential candidates who are not employees of the organisation, maintain their interest in the recruitment process and influence whether a job offer is accepted[6]. The recruitment process is crucial to organisations as it determines the type of talents being brought into the organisation. Some studies have argued that individuals are employed based on a perceived value system rather than based on purely academic achievements[7].

Following employee recruitment, the implementation of processes to promote and encourage employee retention and reduce employee attrition with the healthcare industry must commence. Employee engagement has been theorised to be an effective strategy leading to employee satisfaction within organisations especially the healthcare industry[8]. Employee engagement within the healthcare industry is associated with increased employee satisfaction and improved organisational performance. Employee engagement is defined in literature as all the strategies that are deployed by employees to make employees feel valued and useful to an organisation[9]. Some authors have argued that when employees feel valued and respected within an organisation, it improves the productivity of the employee and the organisation as a whole[10]. Furthermore, it is reported to lead to increased employee retention[11]. Employee retention is reported to be crucial to organisational performance as it indicates reduced employee turnover and attrition rates. It has been reported that effective employee retention strategies must be instituted by organisations to ensure satisfaction and consequent retention within the industry[12]. Efficient management of employees and human resources within the healthcare industry has been associated with increased sustainable competitive sustainable advantage. Sustainability is considered as a multi-faceted concept involving responsible management of people, profits and

the planet. Sustainability of the recruitment and employee engagement and retention practices can lead to improved social and economic outcomes within the healthcare industry.

The systematic literature review approach is selected for this study. It is a type of literature review which methodically assesses and reviews data collected from other research to answer scientific questions[13]. The systematic literature review is a type of secondary survey that designs a rigorous and comprehensive plan to ensure the accuracy and precision of the study[14]. Systematic literature reviews are invaluable as they provide a roadmap to available data on a particular subject matter in addition to the identification of trends and patterns as well as existing gaps in literature[15]. This methodology was selected because the concepts of sustainability and employee retention in healthcare is not new and has been extensively researched over the years. Furthermore, there has been a paradigm in the demands and wants of employees in the healthcare industry which has led to more personalised employee retention practices within the healthcare industry. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to search for gaps as well as current trends in employee retention practices in healthcare.

RESEARCH METHODS

Methodological Choice

Research methods may be observational or experimental. Although experimental data has been reported to have more scientific rigour, it is also time-consuming and expensive to conduct. The analytic approach focuses on the analysis of data in order to identify and explore patterns in data. This study adopts an analytical approach till completion of the project. The systematic literature review is a highly useful method which allows the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative research. The primary research included in this dissertation contains mixed, qualitative and quantitative studies. The distribution of the study using these methods.

Research Strategy

The research strategy for studies used in this research included experimental and survey research. Majority of the studies included in this study used the survey method in the form of structured questions while a few of the qualitative and mixed studies used semi-structured interviews and one of the studies included in this dissertation used a case study methodology.

Time Horizon

Nearly all the studies included in this dissertation used the cross-sectional research approach. This type of study is a study that measures variables at a specific time period[16]. It has been described as taking a snapshot of the population. This is comparable to one study that used a longitudinal approach which observes populations over a prolonged period of time.

Data Collection

The data collection method used in this research is the SALSA framework. The SALSA framework adopts a thorough guide to the process of the search, appraisal, synthesis and analysis of the data. This includes the search strategy employed, selection process and the Preferred Reporting Items for systematic review and Meta-analysis flowchart, inclusion and exclusion criteria, grouping, coding and arrangement of collected data and the thematic

analysis of the collected research. The SALSA framework is one of the most frequently adopted methods for systematic literature reviews to enforce accuracy, precision and robustness[17].

Research Protocol

This study aims to evaluate the current employee recruitment, engagement and retention practices within the healthcare industry and identify sustainable measures targeting healthcare workforce deficits. This study therefore focuses on collection of data relating to current retention practices in healthcare, factors influencing retention of employees in healthcare and sustainable practices that can improve healthcare workers retention.

Search Strategy

All research included in this dissertation were obtained from popular databases and search engines. Google Scholar and CORE were the selected search engines used in this study while ScienceDirect and PubMed were selected to be the databases due to their affiliation to healthcare. They were selected for this study because they are known to have a high concentration of good scientific papers appropriate for the research objectives. The period of the search extended between 1st–8th July, 2023.

The search words applied included:

- Retention

- Human Resources

- Healthcare

- Current practices

- Factors

- Sustainability

The Boolean operator 'and' was applied to the search. The search began with broad searches which were subsequently gradually narrowed. The first search was 'current employee retention practices in healthcare,' the initial search word on Google scholar and CORE, followed by a similar search across the databases (Table 1). Subsequently, other combinations of the search words were applied, including 'sustainability in employee retention practices in healthcare' and factors affecting employee retention in healthcare.

Table 1: Showing the number of search results when the keyword employee retention in healthcare was applied[17]

| S/N	Search Engine	Number of Articles
1	Google Scholar	17,800
2	Core	108
3	Pubmed	574
4	Science direct	5961

Appraisal

The appraisal was created to be extensive and exhaustive to ensure the relevance and suitability of studies were included in the review. The appraisal began with an evaluation of the titles of articles presented in the search results. This process eliminated research with titles that were not similar to the keywords of the research, which led to 105 selected studies. The second step of the research involved removal of duplicate studies across the databases. Following this step was a thorough examination of the abstracts of selected research. Research deemed unsuitable, irrelevant or inappropriate were removed from the pool of studies to be reviewed. Eligibility for the study was determined using the inclusion and exclusion criteria discussed below (Table 2)

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

INCLUSION CRITERIA	EXCUSION CRITERIA
Articles written and/or officially translated in English	Articles written in other languages without an official English translation
Peer-reviewed papers	Pre-prints and other forms of grey literature
Primary research	Other literature reviews and secondary data
Article released between 2013 and 2022	Articles released before 2013

The eligibility criteria of this study were carefully considered to determine the quality, clarity and relevance of included primary research to the research objectives. Articles without an original English translation were not included in the study to reduce the risk of losing information or other contextual or misrepresentation of findings that may occur with translating using translators. Grey literature and pre-prints were also removed from the study due to lack of peer review which may affect the quality of the papers included in the study. Studies released prior to 2013 are less likely to be useful to the findings of this study because one of the major objectives of the study is to evaluate the current retention practices within the healthcare industry. Finally, secondary papers were removed from the research to reduce duplicity and repetition of information.

Following the stages described earlier, the selected papers were then retrieved and read for the first time to ensure appropriateness of the papers. It was then read subsequently to initiate the synthesis of data. This was performed to ensure the rigour and precision of the study.
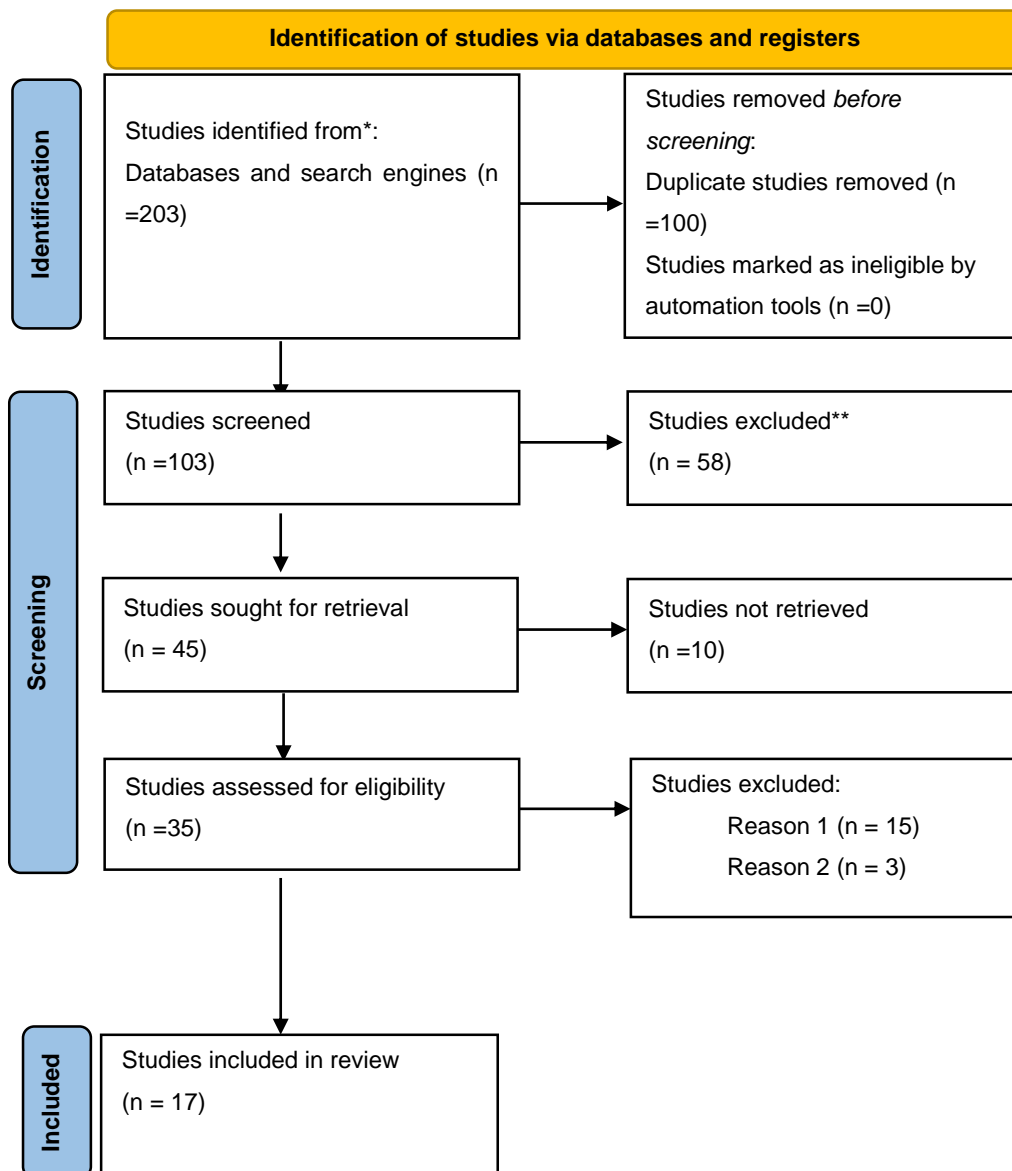
*Reason 1 = articles containing secondary data

**Reason 2 = pre-print material

Synthesis

The synthesis stage was centred around the identification and grouping of the information. Data was obtained from the selected papers using a research matrix (presented in the appendix) detailing the title of the paper, authors, year of release, location of the study, research questions/objectives and methodology of research. Both numerical and textual data obtained from the studies were grouped to prepare for data analysis in the final phase of data collection and analysis.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. The specific themes found in the analysis were identified based on the study's objectives. The first part of the analysis focused on the descriptive presentation of the demographic features of the articles included in the review. This was followed by analysis based on the objectives of the research.

● To evaluate the current employee retention practices within the healthcare industry

● To identify factors associated with employee retention practices within the healthcare industry

● To identify sustainable measures that can lead to improved employee retention processes within the healthcare industry.

RESULTS

Demographics

A total of 17 primary publications were reviewed in this study. Majority of the studies reviewed in this study were done in Asia and North America, specifically the US, with a frequency of 29% each. About 24% of the articles reviewed were done in Europe while only about 12% and 6% were done in Africa and Australia respectively (Figure 1). There was no study conducted in South America reported in this review.
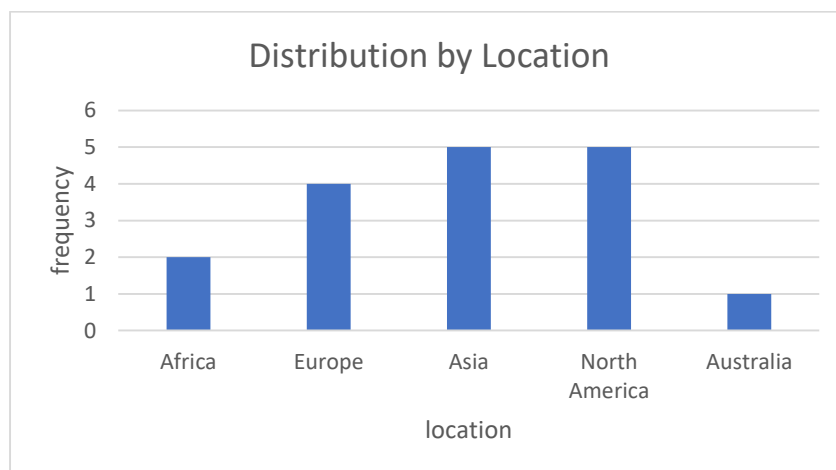
Figure 1: *Chart showing the geographical distribution of studies included in this research*

Majority of the studies included in this research were conducted in 2013. Studies conducted in 2014, 2017 and 2020 were the second most frequently included in this study. However, studies were also included from 2021-2023 (Figure 2).
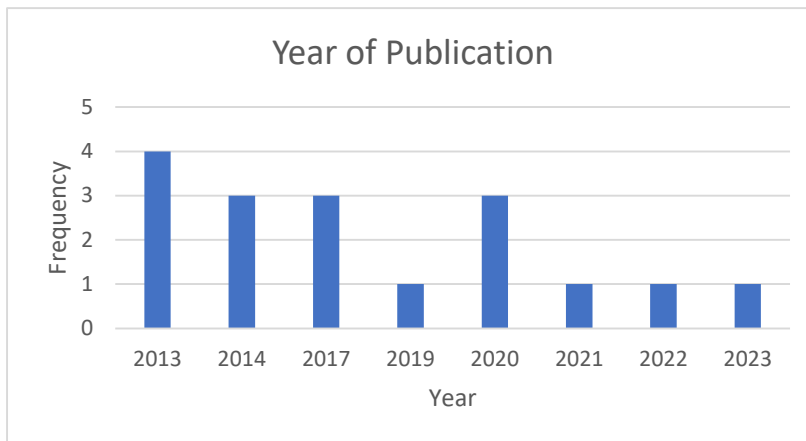
Figure 2: Chart showing distribution based on year of publication[7]

A significant proportion of the studies included in the review used the quantitative methodology (Figure 3) which was frequently conducted using the questionnaire as the research instrument as outlined in the research matrix in the Appendix. Although nearly all of the studies included in this research used an observational approach including both descriptive and analytic approaches, a few studies were designed to be experimental where interventions such as mentorship was conducted and its effect on employee retention measured (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Distribution along research approach

Figure 4: Distribution based on the research approach

Current Practices in Employee Retention in Healthcare

In an exploratory qualitative study conducted in 2020, it was found that market-based approaches such as competitive compensation and benefits package were important in the recruitment of staff in the healthcare sector while community-based approach including intrinsic rewards derived from the job as well as non-monetary benefits were found to increase employee retention by about 13%[18] from a previous turnover rate of about 60%. Conversely, competitive compensation was not found to have any significant effect on employee retention. Employee involvement was reported by Salameh et al. (2023)[19] as one of the mediating practices between employer branding and employee retention. Mentorship was reported in at least 2 of the studies included in this review as one of the current practices central to employee retention in the healthcare industry in addition to other conventional practices including compensation and benefits, training and development, career development, employee involvement and recruitment processes[20].

Factors Affecting Employee Retention in the Healthcare Industry

Terera and Ngirande (2014)[21] found in their study that employee reward is one of the factors that influences employee retention in the healthcare industry. The study found a positive and statistically significant relationship (r = -19.0) (p = 0.000). The study also found that job satisfaction is positively related to employee retention within the healthcare industry[21]. Conversely, the relationship between employee reward and job satisfaction was observed. A study evaluating employee turnover intention and retention among nurses in Ethiopia reported that compensation and lack of professional development were the commonest factors that led to low employee retention within the healthcare industry[22]. Conversely, a study conducted using an analytic hierarchical process among healthcare workers and administrators found that healthcare workers reported career development and succession to be the most important factor affecting retention while recognition was noted among administrators[20]. It has also been reported that working part-time, overtime and a long commute time were all associated with a reduced employee intention to stay at their current healthcare facility.

Morgan, Dill and Kallenberg (2013)[23] evaluated the role of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in employee retention within healthcare facilities. Extrinsic rewards describe characteristics such as wages, benefits and supervision while intrinsic rewards outline characteristics that are based on the nature of professional healthcare job[23]. This study found that both types of rewards improve job satisfaction; only extrinsic rewards were found to statistically correlate with employee retention and intention to stay (P <0.01). Similarly, in another study, lower wages were found to be associated with reduced employee retention among healthcare professionals[24]. A negative factor identified was emotional exhaustion which was found to have a negative effect on employee retention mediated by affective commitment[25].

Another factor affecting employee retention in the healthcare industry was found to be career development and job satisfaction. The study used a descriptive correlational method which yielded results that showed that career development is positively related to professional values orientation. Career development was then found to be related to job satisfaction and consequent intention to stay at the facility[26]. A study conducted in rural India fund career development; recognition, compensation and benefits; and working condition to be factors that can affect employee retention within the healthcare. It was also found by some studies that evaluated the role of job flexibility, autonomy, ability to innovate, career development and conduction of a proper job analysis that these factors have a positive and statistically significant relationship with employee retention (P<0.05)[27].

Sustainable Employee Retention Practices in Healthcare

An experimental study conducted in the USA designed two phases of intervention and implementation of strategies. The first phase of intervention in this study was designed to focus on orientation. The existing orientation was found to be lacking, old and not sufficiently challenging for the expected workload of the nurses. Therefore, one of the strategies proposed by the study to facilitate the retention of nurses was to implement a more comprehensive orientation program. Retention was subsequently observed in this study to increase to 93% from 54% after 1 year. It however was noted to decrease to 76% after 2 years of implementation. Their reason for this decrease is not known but could be explained by reduced emphasis on the program. The second stage of the intervention used in this study is mentorship which was found to be beneficial to nurses. This study reported retention rates ranging between 65% - 75% in the four years following implementation[28].

Another experimental study conducted involved the use of mentorship by senior nurses over a period of 8 weeks was monitored and its effect on job satisfaction, employee engagement, and professional development was measured. The study found mentorship to be associated with higher employee engagement, professional development, job satisfaction and employee retention[29].

DISCUSSION

A study in Norway implemented the use of decentralised nursing education to facilitate the education and consequent recruitment of healthcare professionals within rural areas of northern Norway. This study found that following the implementation of this framework, 87% and 85% of employees were recruited and retained till 2012 respectively[30].

Another study evaluated the role of social sustainability in ensuring employee retention within organisations. The study found that social sustainability, defined as actions that foster the ability of generations to meet their own needs, is related by social capital (which is a resource formed by the social interrelationships that exist with organisation). Additionally, this study found that employee retention can be optimised by leveraging the social capital that exists within the healthcare facility[31]. Another study has proposed that the use of green human resources techniques including green hiring, green training and development, green performance management and compensation were found to improve sustainable employee retention and organisational performance[32]. Employer branding has been identified to have a strongly positive relationship with employee retention among healthcare professionals and authors have argued that employer branding can be used to improve employee retention within the healthcare industry[33].

Current Employee Practices in Healthcare

This study has identified factors such as competitive compensation packages, employee involvement and career development opportunities as current practices in healthcare. Competitive compensation was identified in this study as one of the current practices for employee retention in the healthcare industry. Several authors have reported the effect of compensation on employee retention in nearly every sector including healthcare. Furthermore, competitive compensation has been reported by analysts to reduce organisational spending long term by reducing turnover costs associated with reducing employees[34]. This finding is supported by the argument that employees are one of the most important assets of an organisation; therefore, organisations must be strategic in the use of its assets to make profits and save costs. For example, in a hospital in Canada, nurses were offered an extra $10,000 to commit to two extra years in service[35].

Employee involvement also represents one of the most adopted practices in the healthcare sector that targets employee retention[36]. Employee involvement is directly related to organisational culture and employee retention. Interestingly, one study reported that employee involvement is higher in the healthcare industry on the average than in other sectors[37]. Employee involvement has been found by other studies to mediate the effect of other HRM practices including, training and development, compensation, benefits and recognition among others, on employee retention[38].

Career development was found in this review to be one of the most important determinants of employee retention among healthcare professionals. This differs from recognition which was found to be one of the highest factors that influences employee retention among healthcare administrators. This disparity may derive from differences between the needs of the differing professional groups found in the healthcare industry.

Factors Affecting Employee Retention in the Healthcare Industry

The most commonly identified factors affecting employee retention in study were compensation and benefits, career development, training and development and job satisfaction. This is corroborated by other findings in literature where adequate training, job security and job satisfaction were identified as important factors affecting employee retention within the healthcare industry[39]. The duration of working time was also identified by this study to be one of the factors affecting employee retention within the healthcare industry. Based on Maslow's theory of needs, the effects of career development and recognition can be understood. According to the theory, humans have several physical, psychological and step-fulfilment needs arranged in a step-ladder fashion which are important for the survival and satisfaction of the individual[40]. Therefore, career development and recognition can help satisfy the psychological and self-actualisation needs postulated by Maslow. Another study that was not included in this research identified health information technology as a strategy for employee retention within the healthcare industry.

Although this study reports employees' ability to innovate as one of the factors that affects employee retention within the healthcare industry, a large study conducted among several departments and employees in a healthcare organisation found that encouraging strategic entrepreneurial activity, such as innovativeness, affected healthcare workers differently[41]. This difference in findings probably results from the difference in methodological approach. This study used a literature review which implies that findings from studies included in this review would be represented as part of the findings of this study, whereas the other study used a quantitative survey on a diverse group of healthcare workers.

Sustainable Employee Retention Practices in the Healthcare Industry

Sustainability in healthcare is important to ensure the continuity of care and the quality of services provided. A contracted healthcare workforce leads to increased work stress, burnout, higher attrition rates and poor service delivery, which was found to be evident during the COVID-19 pandemic where the workforce was reduced and stress levels were generally high[42].

Mentorship was found in this study to increase employee retention. This is similar to findings in other literature especially among nurses that found that mentorship can be used to increase employee retention even among senior nurses. One study proposed that mentoring programmes are a form of professional socialisation exercise through which professionals can interact and form mentor-mentee relationships, which increase nurse satisfaction and consequent retention[43]. In evaluating the shortage of the healthcare workforce, retention is not only required at the level of the employee but at the level of the employee as a whole[44]. Therefore, mentorship can help to reduce intention to leave and increase employee mention with the healthcare industry. Mentorship can be a sustainable strategy for employee retention as it is inexpensive and relatively easy to organise.

Employee orientation has been described as a way to introduce new employees to organisation policies, culture benefits and hierarchy groups. This study reported that employee orientation is one of the methods that can be used to facilitate employee retention within the healthcare industry. This finding has been confirmed by studies conducted among service companies in Pakistan where a strong and positive relationship was found between employee retention and good orientation programs[45]. Orientation programs implemented at the beginning of an

employment contract can set the tone and relationship between employer and employee throughout.

The relationship between recruitment and retention has been thoroughly explored. This study confirms the relationship between employee recruitment and retention, and argues that if the recruitment process is properly conducted, it can improve the retention of employees[46]. A study included in this review advocated that healthcare facilities should recruit healthcare workers from decentralised training centres that the organisation is affiliated with to improve recruitment and retention. This is found to be especially in rural settings where greater disparities occur in the distribution of healthcare workers.

Employer branding has been identified as a long-term approach to ensure employee recruitment and retention. According to authors, being identified as an employer of choice increases the attractiveness of organisations[47]. Elements of employee branding such as job prestige, career development and employee brand image reportedly have significant effects on employee retention[48]. Social capital was also reported in this study as one of the major determinants of employee retention in the healthcare industry. Social capital is generally considered in the business world to be an asset that can be leveraged. Findings by study have shown that social capital has a similar effect on employee retention to the creation and maintenance of social relationships among colleagues[49]. Social capital has been found by other studies to mediate this effect by improving quality of work life and the subjective well-being of employees[50]. Therefore, social capital can be used as a sustainable strategy to improve retention.

CONCLUSION

Achieving sustainability of healthcare workers is a goal which requires urgent attention by healthcare managers globally. Employee retention has been proposed by several studies including this one as one of the ways for optimising the human resources within the healthcare system to reduce shortage of healthcare workers.

Employee retention was shown in this study to be influenced by other HRM practices including training and development, recruitment, employee involvement, professional development plans, compensation and recognition. One of the most important findings in this study is the role of orientation and mentorship and the decentralisation of training especially in rural regions to facilitate the retention of employees. Employee retention can lead to sustainability in the healthcare sector if it is properly implemented.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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DECLARATIONS

Ethics approval/Consent to participate: This was not a primary research hence no data collection

Declaration

I confirm that I have read ethics policy guidance and the DPIA information and will follow the guidelines on data protection, data sharing, data storage and GDPR. The information supplied here is accurate to the best of my knowledge.	
Researcher's Signature	Karen Chidera Eze
Date	12/06/2023

Supervisor's Signature	Catherine B. Majdoub
Date	13/6/23

Ethics Reviewer/Second Marker's Signature	
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TABLES

Table 1: Showing the number of search results when the keyword employee retention in healthcare was applied.

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

FIGURES

Figure 1: Chart showing the geographical distribution of studies included in this research

Figure 2: Chart showing distribution based on year of publication

Figure 3: Distribution along research approach

Figure 4: Distribution based on the research approach