

# Retaining culinary talent: A conceptual framework on motivation, contentment, and fortitude

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## ABSTRACT

High turnover among culinary professionals remains a critical concern in the hotel industry. Despite the industry's role in driving economic growth and tourism, the profession suffers from burnout, limited empowerment, and high attrition, threatening service quality and organizational sustainability. Previous studies often emphasize job satisfaction or organizational commitment, overlooking deeper psychological constructs such as job contentment and job fortitude. This paper proposes a conceptual framework that links motivational attributes (empowerment, psychological factors, and work environment) to job contentment and job fortitude, which mediate employee retention. The framework is underpinned by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, and Social Exchange Theory (SET). It addresses contextual challenges within the Malaysian hotel industry, particularly the retention of experienced culinary professionals. This conceptualization offers theoretical contributions and practical insights for hotels to improve workforce sustainability and service excellence.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Sanjeev and Birdie (2019), Xin and Choi (2020), and Abduraximov (2020), the hotel business has been acknowledged for a long time as a significant contributor to the growth of the economy on a national and international scale. This industry plays a crucial role in the creation of jobs, tourism, and the

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development of innovative services. Both the promotion of the tourism agenda and the enhancement of employment prospects are areas in which the industry plays a crucial role in Malaysia.

It has been stated by Kandasamy and Ancheri (2009) and Heimerl et al. (2020) that structural workforce challenges continue to have a significant impact on the sector. There is a high turnover rate, there are limited career paths, and there is low worker satisfaction. These are the issues. The prominence of the sector does not change the fact that these difficulties need to be addressed. It is extremely challenging for culinary specialists to find solutions to these issues because they play a significant part in deciding the overall experience that clients have and the quality of the service that they receive. According to Grandey and Gabriel (2015), Xiong et al. (2023), and Grobelna and Tokarz-Kocik (2025), their work is characterized by long hours, unpredictable shifts, and emotional labour, all of which increase the risks of stress, burnout, and disengagement.

Turnover levels in the hotel industry are reported to be among the highest of any sector, ranging between 30% and 70% annually (Han, 2022). Such instability disrupts service standards, inflates recruitment and training costs, and weakens organisational culture (Michael & Fotiadis, 2022; Pathan, 2022; Mekoth et al., 2023; Almerri, 2023). Workers' ability to bounce back from setbacks is weakened when talented chefs leave, leaving the remaining employees to pick up more of the slack (De Winne et al., 2019; Putri & Renwarin, 2023). Previous research has focused on aspects like organizational dedication, resilience, and job pleasure; however, the more abstract psychological concepts of job contentment and job fortitude have received less attention. Work fortitude demonstrates tenacity and persistence in the face of adversity, whereas job contentment captures a lasting, value-driven feeling of fulfilment. While both provide useful perspectives on retention, they have received little attention in the field of hospitality research (Pimentel et al., 2025).

This conceptual paper argues that motivational attributes are precursors to contentment and fortitude, which in turn influence retention outcomes (Oldham & Fried, 2016; Nisar & Malik, 2019; Kara & Cetinel, 2023; Xiao & Zheng, 2025; Dumitriu et al., 2025). By developing a framework that situates motivation as the foundation for job contentment and fortitude, the study seeks to advance theoretical understanding and provide practical insights for sustaining a resilient culinary workforce in the Malaysian hotel industry.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Empirical investigations have continuously underlined the role of motivation as a significant driver of employee performance, engagement, and retention. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors have been identified, with intrinsic elements such as autonomy and purpose sustaining creativity and engagement, while extrinsic motivators such as pay, incentives, and promotion remain vital in ensuring job satisfaction in routine roles (Gagné et al., 2018; Albrecht & Anglim, 2018). Transformational leadership, supportive organizational culture, and psychological empowerment have been connected with better levels of motivation and alignment with organizational goals (Hoch et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019). Within hospitality contexts, empowerment has been investigated as a crucial antecedent of motivation, innovation, and service delivery. However, experts advise that empowerment might fail if implemented superficially, particularly in environments with rigid structures, leading to role ambiguity or stress (Ruiz-Pérez et al., 2021; Ozpamuk et al., 2023). Autonomy and control have also been shown to influence job satisfaction and organizational commitment, although their effectiveness depends on cultural context, employee readiness, and managerial support (Zhang et al., 2021; Jaleel & Sarmad, 2024). The workplace environment has emerged as another

major determinant of motivation and retention. Studies suggest that supportive environments marked by justice, trust, and collegiality prevent burnout and enhance sustainable engagement (Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2024). Similarly, access to resources, a comfortable physical environment, and opportunities for recognition have been associated to better employee commitment (Camilleri et al., 2024).

Research on job contentment indicates that it is conceptually distinct from job satisfaction, representing a long-term sense of fulfilment grounded in value alignment and career aspirations (Labrague, 2021; Singh & Aurora, 2024). In the hospitality setting, job contentment has been found to be affected by empowering techniques, emotional intelligence, and supportive leadership (Shulga et al., 2025). Job fortitude, which incorporates resilience and perseverance under stress, has been increasingly identified as a psychological resource that mitigates burnout and turnover. Employees with strong fortitude display improved service consistency and remain engaged even in stressful conditions, particularly when supported by transformational leadership and psychological safety (Abubakar et al., 2022; Messmann, 2023).

Job retention remains a recurring concern across the hospitality sector. Although extrinsic rewards remain significant, retention is more strongly driven by perceived organizational support, training, and career growth routes (Acharya et al., 2022; Ferdiana et al., 2023). High turnover continues to be associated with poor pay, inconsistent scheduling, and limited career advancement (Durão et al., 2025). Nevertheless, firms that embrace inclusive policies, wellness initiatives, and organized mobility programs show improved retention outcomes, especially among younger employees (Seyfi, 2024).

Collectively, past studies confirm the significance of motivation, job contentment, and job fortitude in formative employee outcomes. However, there is a substantial gap in combining these constructs into a holistic model that explains their combined influence on retention, particularly in the context of culinary workers within the hotel business.

## **2.1 Research Gap**

Although past studies have provided respected visions into employee motivation, workplace environment, and retention strategies, some gaps continue evident. Much of the present literature tends to highlight job satisfaction or organizational commitment as primary predictors of employee retention, while overlooking the deeper and more durable structures of job happiness and job fortitude (Labrague, 2021; Singh & Arora, 2024). Satisfaction imitates impermanent reactions to workplace conditions, whereas contentment signifies long-term fulfilment aligned with personal values and career aspirations. Similarly, job fortitude, described as resilience and endurance under strain, is never integrated into models of retention despite its capacity to buffer the negative repercussions of stress and burnout (Abubakar et al., 2022; Messmann, 2023).

Another limitation concerns the patchy treatment of motivational attributes. Previous studies often examine empowerment, psychological factors, or work environment independently (Kara & Cetinel, 2023), but few attempt to integrate these variables into a single framework that captures their combined influence. As a result, the paths by which motivation contributes to both happiness and fortitude, and subsequently to retention, remain underexplored.

In the hospitality environment, most of the literature generalises across wide categories of hotel employees without addressing the special issues faced by culinary professionals. These employees experience higher levels of emotional labour, lop-sided working hours, and physically demanding environments; however, studies rarely extricate their experiences from those of other frontline staff such as

housekeeping or front office workers (Xiong et al., 2023; Grobelna & Tokarz-Kocik, 2025). This lack of role-specific analysis confines the applicability of findings for culinary workforce management.

Furthermore, while retention research increasingly acknowledges the significance of organizational culture and leadership, few studies explicitly explore how empowerment and supportive environments might create psychological resources that enable long-term resilience. The mediating roles of job contentment and job fortitude are rarely tested, leaving an important theoretical gap in considering how motivation translates into enduring commitment.

Therefore, there is a need for a holistic framework that integrates motivational attributes with job contentment and job fortitude to explain retention among culinary professionals. Such a model would not only promote theoretical debate but also provide practical insights for hotel managers in devising focused measures to preserve a resilient and devoted culinary team.

### **3. INTEGRATED THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in an integration of recognized organizational theories that collectively explain how motivation, job contentment, and job fortitude influence employee retention in the hotel industry. Theories such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and Social Exchange Theory (SET) give complementary viewpoints that converge to highlight the subtleties of workforce sustainability, particularly among culinary professionals.

The JD-R Model proclaims that employee well-being and performance are shaped by the balance between job demands and job resources, where resources such as empowerment, psychological support, and conducive work environments play a protective role in buffering stress and enhancing engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). Within the hotel industry, where long hours, irregular shifts, and emotional labour are common, these resources are critical in supporting motivation and tumbling burnout. SDT matches this view by highlighting that intrinsic motivation flourishes when employees' basic psychological needs which are autonomy, competence, and relatedness were fulfilled (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2016). Culinary professionals who possess autonomy in their positions, receive assistance in enhancing their skills, and maintain robust collegial relationships are more likely to achieve enduring job satisfaction and psychological resilience. Further, SET provides an interpersonal dimension by positing that employment is supported by reciprocal exchanges, where organizational investment in employee well-being and professional development is reciprocated by loyalty and commitment. In challenging service workplaces like hotels, this reciprocal relationship is especially crucial, since employees' perceptions of support and equity bolster their commitment to remain engaged despite substantial job demands.

By integrating these theoretical viewpoints, the existing study positions motivation, comprising empowerment, psychological, and environmental factors as the groundwork that impacts job contentment and fortitude. These constructions, in turn, function as mediating processes that improve employee retention. This paradigm thus addresses gaps in the literature by reaching beyond traditional measures of job satisfaction and dedication, delivering a complete understanding of how psychological fulfilment and resilience impact workforce sustainability among culinary professionals in Malaysia hotel industry.

### 3.1 Conceptual Framework

Building on the integrated theoretical foundations, this study suggests a conceptual framework that connect employee motivational attributes to job contentment, job fortitude, and eventually job retention among culinary professionals in the hotel industry. The framework reflects the idea that motivation operates not only as a direct antecedent of retention but also as an indirect driver through psychological mechanisms of fulfilment and resilience.

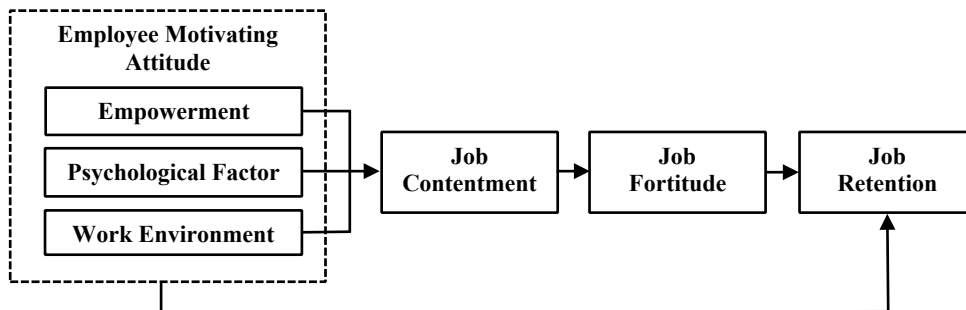


Fig. 1. Proposed conceptual framework

Employee motivational attributes are conceptualized through three dimensions: empowerment, psychological factors, and work environment. Empowerment refers to autonomy, authority, and control over work decisions that foster a sense of responsibility and intrinsic motivation. Psychological factors capture self-efficacy, well-being, and confidence in handling job demands, while work environment encompasses both physical conditions and supportive organisational culture. Collectively, these traits function as essential resources that influence how employees perceive and react to work-related pressures.

The framework positions job contentment as a continuing state of fulfilment that occurs when employees' values, aspirations, and workplace experiences align. It goes beyond temporary satisfaction by capturing deeper psychological investment in one's role. Job fortitude, in contrast, represents the resilience and perseverance that enable employees to resist strenuous environments typical of hotel kitchens. Both constructs are proposed to act as mediators, explaining how motivation translates into stronger intentions to remain within the organisation.

In this model, motivational attributes are hypothesised to have significant effects on both job contentment and job fortitude, while contentment itself is expected to enhance fortitude. Job contentment and fortitude are each proposed to subsidise positively to job retention. Furthermore, the framework foresees that contentment mediates the relationship between motivational attributes and fortitude, and that fortitude mediates the relationship between contentment and retention. These hypothesised pathways reflect a dynamic process where motivation feeds into psychological fulfilment and resilience, which in turn strengthen long-term employee retention.

By integrating these constructs, the conceptual framework provides a holistic model that moves beyond outmoded focus on job satisfaction. It highlights the central role of psychological fulfilment and resilience in sustaining a committed workforce. In doing so, the model not only advances theoretical discourse in hospitality research but also offers practical guidance for hotel managers in designing involvements that

enhance empowerment, supportive environments, and psychological resources to retain skilled culinary professionals.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

The study philosophy used in this conceptual work is positivist, which is suitable for examining measurable connections between culinary professionals' motivational traits, job contentment, job fortitude, and retention. The study's methodology is quantitative and descriptive-causal. Key categories including empowerment, psychological factors, work environment, job contentment, and job fortitude can all be described in a descriptive design, whereas a causal design offers the opportunity to evaluate hypothesized links. By combining these, the study aims not only to describe workforce dynamics in hotels but also to clarify the mechanisms through which motivation shapes retention. The unit of analysis is the individual culinary professional, specifically those holding positions of Chef de Partie or higher with substantial professional experience in the hotel sector. This focus is appropriate since motivation, contentment, fortitude, and retention are inherently personal constructs shaped by individual perceptions and experiences. Data collection will rely on a structured survey questionnaire as the primary research instrument. A Likert-type scale will be used to capture perceptions of the proposed constructs, adapted from prior validated studies to ensure reliability. The questionnaire will be distributed to a representative sample of culinary professionals in Malaysian hotels, enabling generalisable insights. For data analysis, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is proposed as the main analytical technique. SEM is suitable for testing complex frameworks with multiple mediating variables, such as job contentment and job fortitude, while assessing both direct and indirect effects. This approach ensures methodological rigor and allows for validation of the proposed conceptual framework.

In sum, the methodological approach combines positivist philosophy, quantitative survey design, and advanced statistical modelling to empirically test the proposed framework. This guarantees that the results can make a practical contribution by directing strategies to enhance the retention of culinary professionals in the hotel industry, as well as by extending the hospitality and human resource literature.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

This conceptual paper has proposed a motivational framework that integrates empowerment, psychological factors, and work environment as key antecedents of job contentment and job fortitude, which together influence the retention of culinary professionals in the hotel industry. The integration of theories such as the Job Demands-Resources Model, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Exchange Theory provides a robust foundation to explain the pathways through which motivational attributes shape contentment and fortitude, and how these in turn contribute to sustainable workforce retention. The framework emphasises that retention is not only a product of extrinsic rewards or job satisfaction, but also of deeper psychological constructs that determine long-term engagement and resilience. By situating job contentment as an enduring sense of fulfilment and job fortitude as the capacity to persevere under demanding conditions, the model responds to persistent workforce challenges such as high turnover, burnout, and disengagement among culinary professionals.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to extending hospitality and human resource literature by positioning job contentment and fortitude as central mediators that have been underexplored

in retention research. From a practical perspective, the framework provides guidance for hotel managers and policymakers to design targeted interventions that strengthen empowerment practices, foster supportive environments, and promote psychological well-being.

In conclusion, this conceptual framework not only advances scholarly debate but also offers practical insights for addressing the chronic retention issues in the hotel industry. Future empirical research is needed to test and validate the proposed relationships, thereby translating this framework into actionable strategies that enhance both employee well-being and organizational performance.

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## **7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## **8. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS**

The authors used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools (e.g., ChatGPT) to assist in improving language clarity and readability. The AI tool was not used to generate research content, analyse data, or influence the study's findings. All content has been reviewed and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the integrity of the work.

## **9. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS**

All data analysed during this study are included in this published article. The study is based on publicly available information from the official websites of the selected coffee chains. Supplementary materials, including the list of website URLs, sample screenshots, and the coding framework, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## **10. ETHICS STATEMENT**

The authors declare that this study did not involve human or animal subjects. All data were obtained from publicly available sources, and the research was conducted in accordance with the institutional research guidelines of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

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