

## NON- SALARY STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE SATISFACTION AND RETENTION IN SMEs FROM NEUQUEN

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### Abstract

This article aims to analyze the factors influencing employee turnover in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the city of Neuquén and to assess the impact of flexible work strategies on talent retention. The study is grounded in the Conservation of Resources and Self-Determination theories, which posit that the availability of psychological and organizational resources directly affects employees' willingness to remain in their jobs. Using a mixed-methods design combining surveys and participant observation, the perceptions of 35 employees from three local SMEs were explored. The findings indicate that flexibility practices and empathetic leadership foster work-life balance and strengthen organizational commitment. This study contributes to the literature on human resource management in SMEs and offers practical guidelines for promoting sustainable work environments in local contexts. Furthermore, it confirms that even simple interventions, such as flexible arrival times or active breaks, can have significant effects on employees' intention to stay, reinforcing the value of symbolic and accessible strategies.

**Key words:** Employee turnover; talent retention; work-life balance.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Employee turnover remains one of the most persistent challenges within organisational settings, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where the costs associated with the loss of human capital can have a disproportionate impact on productivity and sustainability (Twumasi Ampofo & Karatepe, 2022). Numerous studies have examined this phenomenon

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through theoretical perspectives related to job resources, job demands, and employees' psychological experiences, in order to better understand the factors influencing talent retention.

Recent research has expanded this view by incorporating psychological and relational factors. For instance, Wilkinson et al. (2023) found that employees living alone experienced a lack of support and increased isolation during the transition to remote work amid the pandemic, which affected their work-life balance. Similarly, Wandycz-Mejias et al. (2023), drawing on Self-Determination Theory, demonstrated that job autonomy and work meaningfulness are key predictors of satisfaction and reduce turnover intentions.

Moreover, Twumasi Ampofo and Karatepe (2022), based on the Conservation of Resources theory, identified that abusive supervision undermines job embeddedness—a construct that explains job retention more robustly than traditional attitudinal variables.

Taken together, these studies suggest that rapid staff turnover within organisations does not stem from a single cause but rather from the interaction between available resources, perceived demands, and the meanings employees attribute to their work. Nevertheless, there remains a shortage of studies applying these conceptual frameworks to the SME context, where structural and relational particularities may intensify both risk factors and retention opportunities.

In this regard, the present study seeks to address this gap by integrating these concepts to propose strategies aimed at reducing turnover and strengthening employee retention in such enterprises. Specifically, it aims to identify which organisational practices foster greater job embeddedness among workers, and whether these practices correlate with variables such as age, perceived autonomy, and job satisfaction.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This research focused on employee turnover in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Neuquén City, understood as a multifactorial phenomenon influenced by organisational conditions, leadership practices, and psychological factors. To address this issue, a mixed-methods design with a predominantly qualitative orientation was adopted, aimed at

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understanding the internal dynamics of organisations and evaluating practical tools that support employee retention.

The research approach was designed by the team, drawing on theoretical contributions related to job satisfaction, work meaningfulness, abusive supervision, autonomy, and organisational embeddedness. Rather than replicating a single model, a tailored analytical matrix was developed, adapted to the local context. This approach enabled the triangulation of data from different sources and the construction of a richer, more contextualised interpretation of the phenomenon.

### **1. Data Collection**

Data were gathered in three stages:

- Exploratory interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees and managers from three SMEs to identify perceptions of the work climate, causes of turnover, and leadership practices.
- Perception surveys. A questionnaire with fifteen items was designed, grouped into five dimensions: job satisfaction, autonomy, abusive supervision, organisational embeddedness, and intention to stay. The questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale (0 = “very dissatisfied” to 5 = “completely satisfied”). The selected variables were chosen for their theoretical relevance and practical applicability in SME contexts. For example, to assess work-life balance, items concerning flexible scheduling and perceived compatibility between personal and work life were included.
- Direct observations. On-site visits were conducted to record aspects of the physical environment, interactions between employees and supervisors, and daily work routines. These observations made it possible to identify subtle workplace practices not always captured through surveys, such as informal recognition or spontaneous adjustments to working hours.

### **2. Participants**

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The sample consisted of three SMEs located in Neuquén City, selected through convenience sampling, as they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and receive free advisory feedback. The companies operate in the commercial and service sectors and employ between three and forty-five workers.

Participants included both owners or area managers and operational employees, allowing for complementary perspectives on internal management and working conditions. Although the sample was limited in size, its internal diversity enabled a meaningful comparison of experiences across hierarchical levels.

### 3. Data Analysis

Qualitative data were coded according to predefined analytical categories: job satisfaction, autonomy, abusive supervision, organisational embeddedness, and work meaningfulness. Quantitative data from the surveys were processed using descriptive statistics (percentages and frequencies), allowing patterns in responses to be visualised and compared with qualitative findings.

This methodological triangulation provided a robust interpretation of the causes of turnover and the potential impact of suggested strategies. No predictive models were applied; however, the observed patterns make it possible to formulate hypotheses for future studies.

### 4. Integration with Results

The findings validated the relevance of the selected variables:

- **Job satisfaction.** A positive correlation was found between the implementation of non-monetary incentives (e.g., flexible scheduling, active breaks, symbolic benefits) and satisfaction levels. In companies applying these measures, 70% of employees reported high satisfaction, compared with 40% in those with traditional practices.
- **Work climate and supervision.** Most respondents reported feeling comfortable and valued in their work environment, with no reports of abusive supervision. This underscores the importance of close and respectful leadership as a key retention factor.

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- **Work-life balance.** The implementation of flexible scheduling policies had a direct impact on employees' well-being. In the company adopting this measure, 81% of participants reported high or moderate balance levels, while the proportion was significantly lower in the other two.
- **Job embeddedness and intention to stay.** When age was considered, younger employees (under 35) displayed a higher predisposition towards job change, whereas workers over 40 tended to project themselves within the organisation long term. This suggests that retention strategies should be adapted to generational expectations.

This finding supports the development of age-segmented policies, combining growth opportunities for younger employees with stability measures for older ones.

### 3. RESULTS

#### Job Satisfaction Levels

The results revealed notable differences in job satisfaction levels according to the type of practices implemented by the companies. In SMEs that applied non-monetary incentives and recognition measures, most employees (70%) reported being highly satisfied with their jobs, and only 5% expressed low satisfaction.

In contrast, in companies maintaining traditional management practices, only 40% of employees reported similar satisfaction levels, indicating a lower degree of overall contentment.

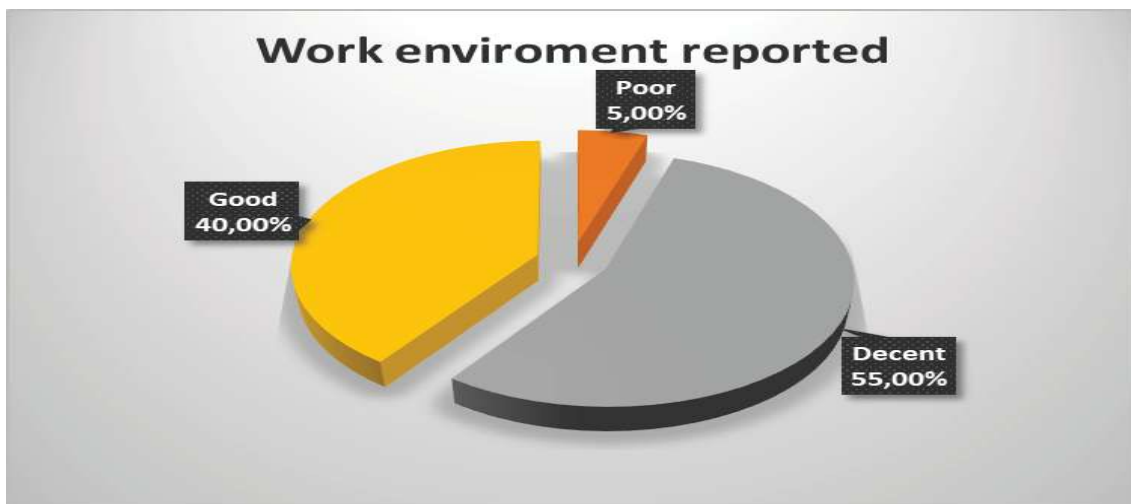
Type of Practice Implemented	High Satisfaction	Medium Satisfaction	Low Satisfaction
Non-salary incentives (flexibility, active breaks, symbolic benefits)	70%	25%	5%
No incentives or traditional practices	40%	35%	25%

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**Note.** Data reflect the proportion of employees reporting each satisfaction level according to the type of management practice implemented.

### Supervision and Work Climate

Regarding supervision and the work climate, the majority of respondents reported not experiencing significant conflicts with their superiors. Overall, participants indicated that they felt comfortable and valued in their work environment. A small group mentioned occasional tensions—such as statements like “sometimes my boss gets angry”—though these situations did not appear to generate a negative or abusive workplace atmosphere.



### Job Embeddedness and Intention to Stay

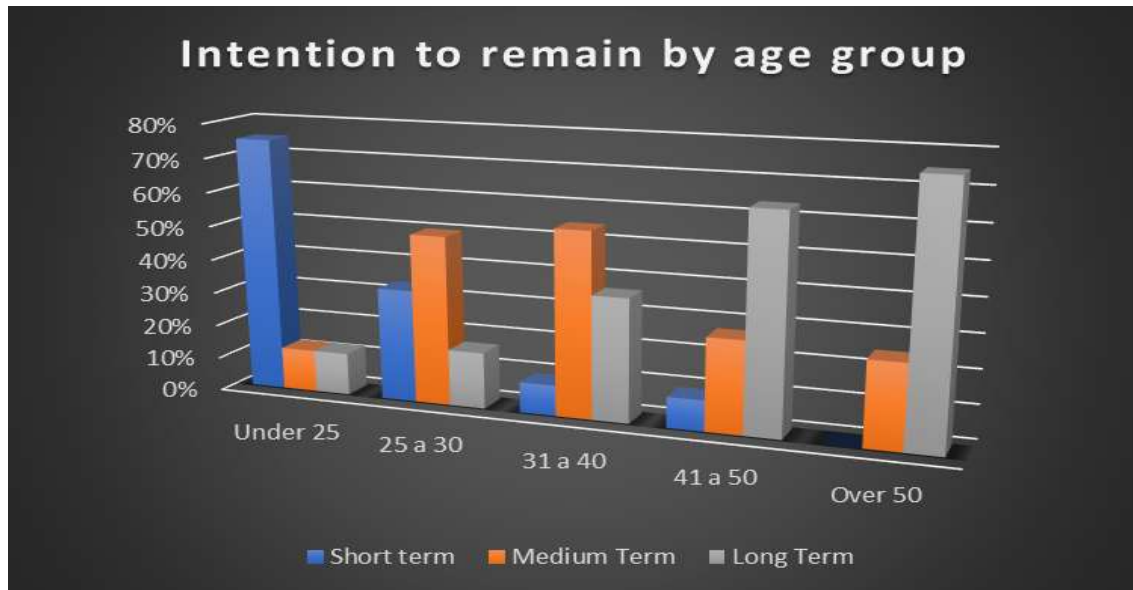
Employees were asked how long they expected to remain in the company. The results showed a relatively balanced distribution across different timeframes of intention to stay (short, medium, and long term). However, when the variable age was incorporated, significant differences in retention trends emerged.

For analysis purposes, participants were classified into five age groups:

- Under 25 years old
- 25–30 years old

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- 31–40 years old
- 41–50 years old
- Over 50 years old



Employees under 25 years of age showed a strong predisposition towards job mobility, with most expecting to remain in the company for less than one year. As shown in Figure 1, younger employees exhibit a marked short-term orientation (75%), while medium- and long-term expectations are considerably lower (13% and 13%, respectively).

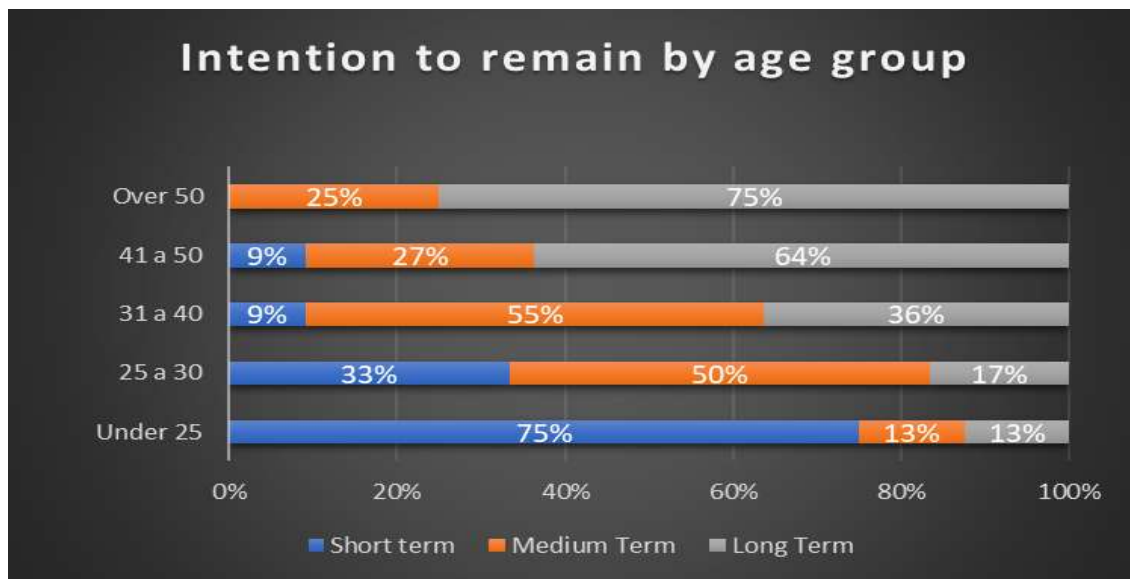
Among those aged 25–30, responses were more diversified: some participants prioritised stability, while others still valued external career growth opportunities. In this group, 33% reported short-term expectations, 50% medium-term, and 17% long-term.

Workers aged 31–40 demonstrated greater employment stability, with 55% planning to remain in the medium term and 36% in the long term.

Finally, employees aged 41–50 showed the highest retention expectations, along with those over 50, who highlighted economic security and seniority as key factors for remaining in the organisation. As age increases, intention to stay becomes stronger: in the 41–50 group, 64% of

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respondents planned to remain long term, and among employees over 50, this figure rose to 75%.



## 4. DISCUSSION

### Interpretations

First, the findings confirm that work flexibility functions as a key psychological and organisational resource, as proposed by the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model. The possibility of self-managing one’s schedule—even through minimal measures, such as allowing arrivals 10 or 15 minutes later—generated a perception of well-being and control over the working day, improving work–life balance and reducing tension. This result demonstrates that employees value autonomy as a form of recognition, reinforcing their attachment to the organisation.

Furthermore, the data suggest that close interpersonal relationships and non-authoritarian supervisory styles, often present in SMEs, can compensate for the absence of formal structures. Contrary to what was reported by Twumasi Ampofo and Karatepe (2022), our study did not reveal high levels of abusive supervision or negative leadership effects; rather, horizontal dynamics appear to foster a more collaborative and supportive environment.



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In addition, the age-related trend highlights significant generational differences: younger employees display greater job mobility and lower levels of embeddedness, while older workers value stability and mutual respect. This pattern is consistent with the findings of Wandycz-Mejías et al. (2023), who argue that job autonomy and work meaningfulness are motivational factors that vary across stages of working life.

From a practical standpoint, these results reaffirm that SMEs can improve employee retention without requiring major financial investments by prioritising human resource management practices centred on trust, communication, and flexibility. Well-being policies not only strengthen commitment and reduce turnover but also contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 8 (“Decent Work and Economic Growth”) by promoting healthier and more sustainable employment conditions.

From a theoretical perspective, the study provides local empirical evidence supporting the articulation between the JD-R model and Self-Determination Theory, demonstrating that resources are not solely material (e.g., salary, stability) but also symbolic (e.g., autonomy, recognition, social support).

Nevertheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample—comprising 35 employees from three SMEs in Neuquén—does not allow for generalisation to the entire sector. Moreover, the flexible scheduling intervention was implemented over a short period, preventing the assessment of long-term effects. Variables related to economic satisfaction and inter-sectoral comparisons were also not included, which could enrich future analyses.

Another key limitation lies in the inherent subjectivity of well-being perceptions, as self-reported responses may be influenced by social desirability bias or by participants’ relationships with their supervisors.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that SMEs:

- Implement formal policies of flexibility and work–life reconciliation, even in small teams.
- Train supervisors in empathetic leadership and effective communication to strengthen internal social resources.

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- Incorporate regular assessments of the organisational climate to detect early signs of demotivation or intention to leave.

From an academic perspective, future research should expand the sample and adopt longitudinal approaches to explore how the interaction between autonomy, support, and work meaningfulness evolves over time. It would also be valuable to integrate deeper qualitative methods (such as in-depth interviews or focus groups) to capture the emotional experiences underlying quantitative data.

### 5. CONCLUSION

This research provided an in-depth understanding of a growing issue within the local business environment: the high employee turnover in SMEs in the city of Neuquén. Far from being a purely economic phenomenon, the results showed that turnover is closely linked to relational and organizational factors. It was observed that work flexibility, perceived organizational support, and healthy interpersonal relationships are key determinants in talent retention, directly influencing employees' well-being and organizational commitment.

The findings demonstrate that autonomy and work meaningfulness function as essential resources for strengthening commitment and reducing turnover intention, consistent with Self-Determination Theory and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model. Likewise, it was found that simple practices—such as allowing schedule adjustments or encouraging direct communication with supervisors—have positive impacts on work-life balance and employee well-being.

The study also revealed that age and career stage significantly influence retention intentions: younger workers value mobility and learning opportunities, whereas older employees prioritize stability. Therefore, retention policies should be flexible and tailored to each age group, combining symbolic incentives, recognition, and opportunities for development.

In the context of SMEs, where hierarchical structures are smaller and labor relations closer, these strategies are particularly effective, as they foster trust and a sense of belonging. However, structural limitations related to financial resources and the absence of formal talent management policies were also identified, restricting the sustainability of these practices in the long term.

From a practical perspective, this study provides concrete tools for human resource management in local companies, proposing an accessible intervention model that directly contributes to Sustainable Development Goal No. 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. Companies that adopt measures

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focused on well-being, flexibility, and recognition can not only enhance job satisfaction but also increase productivity and organizational stability.

Finally, it is recommended that future research broaden the sample to include different productive sectors and further explore the relationship between motivation, leadership, and work meaningfulness. Examining these dimensions would allow the construction of stronger predictive models and the design of management tools better adapted to the reality of small enterprises.

In summary, the evidence confirms that employee turnover is not merely an operational problem but a complex phenomenon that reflects the balance—or imbalance—between job demands and the personal and organizational resources available. Promoting more human, flexible, and equitable work environments not only improves workers' lives but also strengthens the productive and social fabric of the community.

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