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# The Role of Human Resource Management in Sustaining or Advancing: A Review of Compensation Systems and Low-Wage Employment

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**Abstract:** This study examines compensation systems in low-wage employment, focusing on their design, organizational rationale, and outcomes for employers within the context of Human Resource Management. Utilizing a qualitative literature review method, the research analyzes secondary data from sources like Scopus and Google Scholar to provide insights into compensation trends in low-wage sectors. The findings show that compensation systems in these jobs are typically structured to minimize organizational costs, offering low wages, limited benefits, and minimal employee development opportunities. These designs lead to challenges for workers, such as financial insecurity, job dissatisfaction, and restricted career advancement, while organizations face high turnover, decreased productivity, and reduced employee engagement. Although these strategies provide short-term cost savings, they create long-term challenges for workforce stability. The study emphasizes the importance of designing compensation systems that balance organizational needs with employee well-being, ultimately contributing to sustainable workforce development and improved organizational outcomes.

**Keyword:** compensation, low-wage, literature review, human resource management

## INTRODUCTION

A central aspect of Human Resource Management (HRM) is the development of compensation systems, which are deeply intertwined with the nature of the employment contract. This contract represents an indeterminate exchange where labor power is traded for a wage (Perkins & Jones, 2020). The inherent challenge lies in determining what constitutes a fair amount of work for a given wage, with the wage being easy to quantify but the labor effort less so. This ambiguity often leads to tension in the employment relationship, as both the organization and the employee must negotiate what is considered fair compensation for the work performed (Kwon & Jang, 2022).

Organizations may adopt different strategies in setting compensation. Some may opt for simple methods, such as paying frontline employees the minimum wage or the lowest amount the labor market will tolerate. Others may implement more sophisticated strategies, such as negotiating wages collectively or adjusting pay based on individual performance and contributions (Abdulsalam et al., 2021). Historically, compensation systems were linked directly to output, which was easier to measure during the industrial revolution. However, with the rise of labor unions, collective bargaining led to standardized pay rates for specific jobs. Since 1979, there has been a marked decline in unionization, accompanied by a shift back towards performance-based pay, often tied to individual results (Ulfsdotter et al., 2021).

An effective compensation system requires an understanding of employees' needs and expectations from their work environment. Traditionally, employers have approached this from the perspective of the "rational economic man," assuming that labor is exchanged primarily for financial gain in the form of wages. This transactional relationship, where labor is traded for financial rewards, has been central to traditional employment contracts (Anner et al., 2021). However, modern employment relationships go beyond monetary compensation. Employment contracts now often include additional benefits, with job security being a key factor. While wages are essential, the assurance of regular and secure income becomes even more valuable during times of economic uncertainty (Balcilar et al., 2020). Job seekers may prioritize stability over higher pay, particularly in sectors like the public sector. However, the pursuit of job security can conflict with an organization's need for flexibility in responding to market changes, potentially limiting its ability to adapt swiftly (Miceli et al., 2021).

Compensation systems play a critical role in determining whether organizations can sustain or advance. For many frontline workers, wages may barely meet the minimum standard set by the labor market or fall in line with legal requirements (Clemen et al., 2021). Low-wage workers are often more vulnerable to economic fluctuations, and their compensation can significantly affect their quality of life. Consequently, HRM must meticulously create compensation frameworks that comply with legal requirements while also addressing the enduring viability of employee engagement, retention, and productivity, particularly in low-wage industries (Andersson & Sandberg, 2023). Achieving equilibrium among equity, employee input, and organizational adaptability is essential for remuneration systems to promote both human welfare and organizational prosperity.

There are three primary research paradigms that seek to comprehend inequality and its effects on subordinate workers inside companies. Initially, there exists research that investigates HR practices and frameworks that significantly contribute to inequality. This research frequently examines a comprehensive array of practices, discerning overarching methodologies in human resource management or focusing on particular aspects across diverse practices (Amis et al., 2020). Secondly, there exists macro-oriented research that examines value and rent distribution mechanisms. This study aims to classify all non-executive personnel as a singular entity, perceiving them as a uniform stakeholder group (Bapuji et al., 2018). Nonetheless, considerable disparities are present within the non-executive workforce, wherein certain individuals possess far less authority to requisition resources compared to their counterparts.

A multitude of research in this domain examine outcomes for individuals at the lower income tier, emphasizing macro issues such as minimum wage legislation and income inequality (Wu et al., 2024), employing wide conceptions and measures such household income, inclusive of government programs. Finally, there exists a body of research investigating the experiences of individuals in insecure employment (Kalleberg, 2018), frontline roles, positions necessitating limited human capital, or low-wage occupations

(Schultz, 2019). This research examines worker experiences but does not extensively investigate compensation specifics, except than recognizing low earnings.

## METHOD

This type of research is a literature review. The approach utilized in this study is qualitative, employing a descriptive method. To achieve its objectives, this research relies on a literature review. As for the data collection technique, the study involves reviewing theories from various relevant literature sources related to the research topic. The data collected in this research comes from secondary sources, using databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar (Kraus et al., 2022). In addition to these methods, this study critically analyzes existing literature to identify gaps in current research and to build a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The use of secondary data enables the researcher to synthesize information from multiple perspectives, ensuring a thorough examination of the research problem (Taherdoost, 2021). By focusing on peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books, this literature review aims to provide an in-depth analysis of trends, theories, and findings relevant to the field of study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Compensation in Human Resource Management

Compensation in human resource management is typically categorized into two types: direct compensation and indirect compensation. Direct compensation refers to the direct income received by employees, encompassing base salary, allowances, and incentives, which constitute the employees' entitlements and the company's obligations (Putra & Gupron, 2020). Salary denotes the periodic compensation provided to permanent employees, accompanied by a specific assurance. Allowances are remuneration granted by the company to employees recognized for their effective contributions to the attainment of the company's objectives. Incentives are awarded to specific employees for surpassing established performance standards (Sitopu et al., 2021).

According to Salas et al. (2021), indirect remuneration is offered to employees to improve their welfare. This type of compensation is supplied independently of salary, allowances, or incentives and may encompass amenities offered by the corporation to its employees, including housing and complimentary health services. Compensation is seen as recognition or remuneration provided by the company to employees in acknowledgment of their contributions (Didit & Nikmah, 2020). In organizations or enterprises, remuneration represents acknowledgment of employees who have aided in attaining shared objectives through their job efforts (Tumi et al., 2022). Employee satisfaction with compensation arises when individuals are content with the remuneration they receive, whether monetary or in other benefits, as a reward for their accomplished tasks and responsibilities. Compensation may be rendered in multiple forms, including salaries, allowances, and additional bonuses.

### Various Pay Strategies

There are multiple pay strategies, and their dominance has shifted over time. These strategies can take different forms, and the complexity arises from the fact that they may be applied either individually or collectively. Broadly, two main types of pay systems can be identified. The first is output-based pay, where compensation is tied to a measure of production in the broadest sense (Chen et al., 2023). On an individual level, this could relate to piecework or other forms of individual payments, such as commissions and individual bonuses. The work of Frederick Taylor (2023) pioneered the concept of Scientific Management, which focused on creating clear hierarchies and breaking down tasks into their simplest components. This approach made it easier to measure output and reward individuals accordingly. The goal of this system was to maximize production and minimize inefficiency, with little regard for intrinsic rewards or job satisfaction. Scientific Management has often been associated with monotonous and oppressive assembly line work, prioritizing quantity over quality (Nies, 2021). Despite the decline of traditional manufacturing, particularly in Britain, Taylorist methods persist in many low-value service sector jobs, such as call centers and fast food, where high employee turnover and poor quality standards have not deterred firms from using these strategies (Schroedel, 2024). More broadly, the use of individual performance-related pay has increased since the 1980s in Britain, often manifesting in traditional Taylorist methods, but also in more nuanced systems like measured day work, team-based pay, and profit-sharing schemes (Wood et al., 2023).

The second type of pay strategy is input-based pay, where employees are compensated based on the skills or competencies they bring to the organization. Systems such as skill-based, merit, and competency pay fall under this category, with employees rewarded for their potential contributions rather than just their output (Kang & Lee, 2021). Examples include "golden hellos," or upfront bonuses to attract talent, and payments to knowledge-based workers for their expertise. Knowledge workers, in particular, are compensated for their specialized professional or technical knowledge, which organizations often seek to retain through competitive pay packages (Grimpe et al., 2023). Over time, the experience within an organization can further enrich an employee’s value, especially in areas such as client relationships and negotiation skills, which are critical for strategic success. Although this type of knowledge may not always be formally documented, it is highly valued, and retaining employees with such expertise becomes crucial. Despite the focus on skills and competencies, there is often an element of output assessment in the compensation of knowledge workers, where their value is regularly reflected in successful outcomes, frequently accompanied by performance-related bonuses (Thneibat & Sweis, 2023).

**Previous Research on Compensation Low-Wage Employement**

Prior studies on pay in human resource management have been thoroughly examined. Research on inequality frequently distinguishes between executives and employees as independent claimants to organizational resources, assigning varying degrees of bargaining power to each group (Bapuji et al., 2020). We contend that this binary classification is devoid of subtlety. Consolidate supervisors, physicians, small business proprietors, migratory laborers, and fast-food personnel into a singular category. Individuals in the preceding class typically command better remuneration, exhibit superior abilities and education, and enjoy enhanced access to financial resources, resulting in intensified rivalry for their expertise in the labor market (Gabrielli & Impicciatore, 2022). Conversely, the latter segment typically receives lower remuneration, necessitates fewer educational credentials, and possesses restricted access to financial resources, rendering them more interchangeable from an employer's viewpoint.

Our research focuses on low-wage employment and non-transitory workers in these roles. These positions are frequently categorized as low-skill employment, generally necessitating minimal education, typically no more than a high school diploma, and less than one year of work experience. Individuals in these positions are more prone to receiving inadequate compensation and possessing lower household incomes relative to those in high-skill occupations (Maxwell, 2006). This group encompasses two primary types of workers: youth who perceive these positions as transient and economically disadvantaged individuals for whom low-skill employment constitutes a long-term reality (Maxwell, 2006). Young employees in low-wage roles frequently remain enrolled in educational institutions and may receive financial assistance from their families, coupled with diminished personal obligations. Upon completing their school or acquiring job experience, they are likely to advance to higher-level, skilled employment with improved remuneration.

Conversely, economically disadvantaged workers typically have lower educational attainment and sporadic work histories. They are more prone to living in poverty and occupying low-wage jobs for extended periods or even their entire lives (Maxwell, 2006). Given that these two groups have different life circumstances and potential career trajectories, our focus is on the latter group who are more likely to remain in low-wage employment long-term. In the United States, these workers represent the lowest income strata among employed individuals and are crucial for understanding societal inequality. While the work and compensation systems for both groups may be similar, the impact of these designs differs significantly. Non-transitory workers lacking financial resources experience these compensation structures differently than those who view low-wage jobs as a temporary phase. Understanding these nuances is essential for addressing inequality and developing effective human resource strategies tailored to the needs of low-wage workers.

**Characteristics of Low-Wage Work**

Low-wage employment frequently entails minimum prerequisites, generally requiring merely a high school diploma and less than one year of professional experience. The few obstacles to entry facilitate a very dynamic labor market. Low-wage work is predominantly found in many important areas, chiefly service, retail, and manufacturing, with positions such as administrative support, production, food preparation and service, sales, and building and grounds maintenance prevailing in these sectors. Collectively, these sectors comprise over 75% of all low-wage employment opportunities. The service industry, notably, contains a disproportionately large number of low-wage jobs (Maxwell, 2006). Although these positions are deemed "low skilled" because of their limited educational and experiential prerequisites, certain specialized competencies, such as physical, mechanical, communication, problem-solving, and proficiency in the English language, may nevertheless be essential (Maxwell, 2006). Recent immigrants may encounter difficulties in obtaining and retaining these positions if proficiency in English is a requirement.

Low-wage occupations, regardless of the industries they dominate, exhibit significant parallels in their design and management practices. A characteristic of low-wage employment is the implementation of a "command and control" management approach, which restricts employee autonomy and decision-making capabilities. This methodology guarantees that tasks are "rigorously defined and narrowly constrained, reducing organizational reliance on employee judgment and cognitive ability" (Flanagan & Clibborn, 2023). This management style may be appropriate for low-wage positions due to their often minimum skill requirements and high staff turnover rates. Lewa et al. (2022) proposed a situational leadership paradigm, indicating that leadership and management strategies had to be customized to certain contexts. This concept posits that leadership approaches must adapt according to the necessary balance of relational and task-oriented attention for employees, as well as their developmental requirements. Organizations frequently employ a directive and task-oriented leadership approach, such as the command-and-control style, for low-wage workers who may necessitate more developmental help (Li et al., 2022).

Compensation in low-wage employment is generally designed to correspond with the minimal skills and credentials necessary (Clemens, 2021). Consequently, these positions typically provide minimum salary or marginally higher, with minimal variance until the firm adopts performance-based or tenure-related remuneration structures. Nonetheless, due to the minimum skill prerequisites, businesses frequently emphasize cost-reduction strategies over substantial remuneration packages, perpetuating the ongoing low wages in these industries. Organizations may provide restricted benefits, exacerbating the financial instability experienced by employees in these sectors (Hafiz et al., 2020).

**Limited Learning and Development in Low-Wage Jobs**

Many low-wage jobs are designed with limited opportunities for employee learning and development, largely due to their high turnover rates. Organizations tend to minimize resource expenditures on training and development for these roles, which reinforces the highly structured nature of the jobs. Research indicates that formal on-the-job training for low-wage workers is typically minimal (Ma et al., 2024). This limitation can hinder employees' ability to acquire new skills, advance within the company, and improve their career prospects. Moreover, the physically and psychologically demanding nature of many low-wage jobs, such as warehouse work or caregiving, often leads to higher rates of health issues and workplace safety concerns (Lodovici et al., 2022). Jobs that require emotional labor, like caregiving roles, can also induce significant stress, negatively impacting worker performance.

Furthermore, the lack of investment in training and development for low-wage workers creates a cycle of limited upward mobility, where employees are often stuck in roles with few opportunities for career advancement. This situation can lead to lower job satisfaction and higher turnover, perpetuating the problem of workforce instability (Hall et al., 2024). Without access to development programs, employees are less likely to build the skills necessary to move into higher-paying or more skilled positions, which can also contribute to long-term economic inequality. Organizations that fail to provide learning and growth opportunities risk not only lower employee engagement but also decreased productivity and overall organizational performance, as a less skilled workforce struggles to meet evolving business demands (Malik & Garg, 2020). Thus, investing in training and development, even for low-wage roles, can bring long-term benefits to both employees and the organization.

**Worker and Organizational Outcomes of Low-Wage Compensation Systems**

Compensation systems for low-wage work are typically structured to minimize costs for the organization while meeting legal requirements such as minimum wage standards. Common forms of compensation in these roles include hourly wages with minimal benefits, little to no performance-based incentives, and limited opportunities for bonuses or raises (Nunn & Hunt, 2021). The primary design of these compensation systems is often rooted in the nature of the work itself, roles that require minimal education and training, high turnover rates, and a readily available labor pool. Organizations craft these compensation systems to maintain flexibility and control over labor costs, especially in industries with fluctuating demand, such as retail, hospitality, and fast food (Scully & Torraco, 2020). By keeping compensation low and standardized, companies can remain competitive in cost-sensitive sectors, particularly those where margins are thin, and labor is seen as a controllable expense.

The outcomes of such compensation systems are significant for both workers and organizations. For workers, low-wage compensation designs often lead to financial instability, limited job satisfaction, and reduced opportunities for upward mobility (Storer & Reich, 2021). As a result, employees may experience higher levels of stress, reduced motivation, and a stronger likelihood of turnover, which can perpetuate a cycle of low productivity and poor workplace morale (Zhao et al., 2024). On the organizational side, while these systems may offer short-term cost savings, they can result in higher long-term costs due to frequent employee turnover, lower levels of employee engagement, and reduced organizational loyalty. Furthermore, organizations relying on low-wage compensation systems may struggle to attract and retain skilled workers, ultimately impacting their overall performance and competitiveness in the marketplace (Charness et al., 2020).

**Challenges in Low-Wage Employement**

One of the primary challenges is the economic vulnerability faced by workers. Many employees in these roles receive compensation that barely meets the legal minimum wage, leaving them with insufficient income to cover basic needs such as housing, healthcare, and education (Lodovici et al., 2022). This financial strain often results in high levels of stress, anxiety, and job dissatisfaction, which negatively impacts both employee well-being and workplace productivity (Tamunomiebi & Mezeh, 2021). Additionally, the lack of benefits such as health insurance or retirement savings plans contributes to long-term financial insecurity for these workers, further compounding their economic difficulties.

Another significant challenge in low-wage work is the limited access to career development and advancement opportunities. Low-wage positions are typically designed with minimal skill requirements and offer little training or professional development (Farris & Bergfeld, 2023). Organizations often view these roles as easily replaceable, resulting in low investment in employee growth. As a result, workers in low-wage jobs have few opportunities to advance within the company, perpetuating a cycle of low wages and limited upward mobility (Charness et al., 2020). This lack of career progression not only hampers the individual's ability to improve their financial standing but also reinforces systemic inequality within the workforce.

For organizations, managing the challenges of low-wage work environments poses its own set of difficulties. High turnover rates, common in low-wage sectors, lead to increased recruitment and training costs, while low employee engagement and morale can result in decreased productivity and service quality (Efobi, 2022). The reliance on low-wage labor may offer short-term financial savings, but in the long run, it can undermine organizational sustainability by creating a workforce that is disengaged and prone to frequent turnover (Houston et al., 2024). For human resource management, addressing these challenges involves balancing cost control with strategies that enhance employee well-being, engagement, and long-term retention, ultimately contributing to the organization's capacity to sustain and advance.

## CONCLUSION

The compensation systems in low-wage work are intricately linked to the broader structure of Human Resource Management, particularly in balancing organizational flexibility and employee well-being. While many organizations adopt compensation strategies that minimize costs, such as standardized wages and limited benefits, these designs often result in significant challenges for both employees and employers. Workers face financial instability, reduced job satisfaction, and limited opportunities for advancement, which perpetuate economic inequality and high turnover rates. For organizations, the short-term cost savings of low-wage compensation systems may lead to long-term issues, such as workforce disengagement, low productivity, and higher costs associated with frequent employee turnover. The research highlights that effective compensation systems must account for both the immediate and long-term needs of employees, particularly in low-wage sectors where vulnerability to economic fluctuations is higher. Designing compensation structures that balance fairness, employee development, and organizational flexibility is essential to fostering employee engagement, retention, and productivity. By investing in employee development, even in low-wage roles, organizations can create a more sustainable workforce and enhance overall organizational performance.

Future research should explore more dynamic compensation models that address the unique challenges faced by low-wage workers, particularly in sectors with high turnover rates and limited career advancement opportunities. There is also a need for longitudinal studies examining the impact of different compensation strategies on both employee well-being and organizational outcomes, such as productivity and employee retention. Additionally, further investigation into the role of employee development programs and their integration into compensation systems could provide valuable insights into reducing economic inequality and improving job satisfaction for low-wage workers. Moreover, exploring the impact of technological advancements and automation on low-wage compensation systems could offer new perspectives on evolving labor markets and HRM strategies.

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