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# The Growing Financial Cost of Hotel Employee Turnover

Anthony Brien

Lincoln University, New Zealand

Scott Richardson

Abu Dhabi Hospitality, Les Roches, Abu Dhabi

Edmund Goh

Abu Dhabi Hospitality, Les Roches, Abu Dhabi

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## **Abstract:**

For decades, high employee turnover has been accepted as inevitable in the hotel industry. However, this passive acceptance must be challenged from a human capital perspective and a financial standpoint. While hotel executives focus on the operational aspects of employee turnover, the financial costs associated with attrition remain critically underexplored. These costs extend beyond recruitment and onboarding, encompassing off-boarding procedures, productivity loss, administrative overheads, disruptions in team dynamics, reduced service quality, and potential revenue losses. Overlooking the financial impact of turnover is no longer tenable. This conceptual paper advances the argument for a more rigorous and analytical approach to understanding turnover costs in the hotel sector, highlighting the need for validated costing models and encouraging the development of frameworks that can guide data-informed decision-making. Doing so lays the groundwork for future research directions that support a shift toward strategic, cost-conscious human capital management in hospitality.

**Key words:** Hotels, employee turnover, cost.

**Track:** Special Track 1: The Future of Talent Management

**Focus of Paper:** Theoretical/Academic.

**Type of submission:** Paper. Conceptually based

## **1. Introduction**

For decades, high employee turnover has been accepted as an unavoidable characteristic of the hotel industry with little focus on its financial impact. While hotel executives have traditionally focused on mitigating the immediate operational impacts of turnover, less attention has been placed on accurately quantifying its full economic consequences. Given the tight profit margins hotel report, competitive talent war, and workforce shortages, this reactive stance is no longer sustainable.

The hospitality industry faces distinct and compounding human capital challenges. Long hours, physically demanding work, and relatively low wages contribute to low occupational attractiveness, particularly among younger job seekers (2020). This situation is further compounded by a reduced pipeline of future talent, for example, in countries such as New Zealand, where enrolments in hospitality education have declined significantly (Education Counts, 2025). Coupled with historically high turnover rates, the industry grapples with a structural labour crisis that threatens service quality and business sustainability. Employee turnover generates numerous expenses beyond the obvious recruitment costs. These include productivity losses during vacancies and training periods, administrative processing costs, knowledge transfer failures, team disruption, reduced service quality, declining customer satisfaction, and potential revenue losses. When systematically

measured, the aggregate financial impact of turnover can account for a sizeable proportion of operating expenses and impact the bottom line.

Despite these consequences, the literature remains limited in offering robust frameworks or models to calculate the full financial cost of employee turnover in hospitality contexts. This conceptual paper aims to fill this research gap by advocating for academics and the hotel industry to collaborate in changing the perspective of viewing turnover as an inevitable cost of doing business to recognising it as a quantifiable and manageable expense. This can be achieved by adopting more rigorous and holistic approaches to turnover cost assessment (how it can be calculated) and potential industry/country benchmarks, enabling hotel executives to build a stronger business case for investing in targeted attraction and retention strategies and workforce development initiatives.

## **2. Analysis of the current state of knowledge: what does the literature say?**

A review of the literature in Scopus, using a combination of keywords: hotel, employee turnover, turnover, and costs, highlights research in this genre began in 1974. Pioneering studies by Griffith et al. (Griffith, Moore, & Krouse, 1974), followed much later by Hinkin and Tracey (T. Hinkin & J. Tracey, 2000), primarily focused on the relationship between training and turnover in the food services industry. Only seven articles were tightly linked to the keywords during that time, compared to seventy-nine articles in the following twenty-four years, signalling growing academic interest in understanding and addressing turnover in what can be considered wider hospitality, not just in the hotel context. While acknowledging there is much more literature related to employee turnover and the potential reasons for turnover, some of which are reported in this paper, to be clear, this paper focuses on the costs of employee turnover.

### 2.1 Employee Turnover

Research on employee turnover has seen several thematic evolutions. Initial studies examined job satisfaction (Mobley, 1977), employee exits (Wasmuth & Davis, 1983), and productivity impacts (Cho & Erdem, 2006; Palmer & Dean, 1973; Rothwell, 1982). By the late 1980s and 1990s, the focus shifted to practical retention strategies (Woods & Macualy, 1989), the normalisation of high staff turnover rates (Reeve, 1994), and the emergence of “turnover culture” as a structural issue within hospitality organisations (M. Deery & Shaw, 1999; M. A. Deery & Shaw, 1997; Iverson & Deery, 1997)

Notably, Simmons and Hinkin (2001) introduced a critical line of inquiry linking turnover to hotel profitability, signalling the need to treat turnover as more than a human resources concern; however, this line of enquiry has not progressed. Subsequent research confirmed that turnover occurs across hierarchical levels (Birdir, 2002). Qualitative approaches began to examine turnover intentions (e.g. Lee, Huang, & Zhao, 2012), jobs (Robinson, Kralj, Solnet, Goh, & Callan, 2014), and the role of social capital and leadership in influencing turnover decisions (Brien, Thomas, & Hussein, 2015; Brown, Thomas, & Bosselman, 2015). Recent literature has returned to the themes of psychological well-being, organisational pride (Le, Hancer, Chaulagain, & Pham, 2023), technological disruption through automation and robotics (L.-X. Zhang, Li, Wang, Mao, & Zhang, 2023), and country-specific turnover analysis (for example, Aron Apul Parasian, Lorina Siregar, & Marlinda, 2024). Other contributions have re-examined psychological contracts (C. Zhang, Deeprasert, & Jiang, 2024) and emphasised safety and mental well-being (Oriade, Osinaike, & Adebayo, 2024) in employee retention strategies.

### 2.2 Employee turnover costs.

Despite decades of research on employee turnover in the broader management literature, a significant gap exists in understanding and systematically quantifying its financial impact within the hotel industry. Early works discussed the cost of employee turnover in generalised terms, with, for example, Deems (Deems, 1999) and Steed and Shinnar (Steed & Shinnar, 2004) offering broad categorisations of costs related to recruitment, onboarding, and lost productivity. The introduction of human capital cost accounting frameworks (Chen & Lin, 2004) marked a step towards more structured economic analysis, but this area has seen limited advancement in hospitality-specific research. Few studies have directly addressed turnover costs within the context of tourism and hospitality. Pioneering studies by Denver & McMahon (1992) proposed cost-effective preventive measures, followed by William et al. (1995), who conducted a foundational analysis of turnover costs in the hospitality sector.

Hinkin and Tracey (2000) explored the financial implications of turnover through the lens of learning curves and productivity losses but did not calculate actual costs. A decade later, (M. Davidson, N. Timo, & Y. Wang, 2010) revisited this issue with an empirical investigation into hotel employee turnover costs, which remains one of the few focused contributions in this area. Since then, few follow-up studies have built upon these cost models within hotel operations.

While general management literature has continued to explore the hidden costs of turnover (Garman, Corbett, Grady, & Benesh, 2005; Mercer, 1998; O'Connell & Kung, 2007), including issues such as loss of tacit knowledge and disruption to team dynamics, hospitality research has lagged in integrating these insights. Some contributions, such as those of Guilding et al. (2014), have begun linking staff turnover to accountability and performance metrics, but comprehensive financial modelling remains underdeveloped. Interestingly, some studies have acknowledged that when managed strategically, turnover may contribute to organisational renewal and growth (Kesner & Dalton, 1982). However, this perspective does not negate the necessity of quantifying the costs involved. Given the labour-intensive nature of the hotel industry, where service quality is closely tied to human capital, this research gap is particularly pressing.

### *2.3 Potential employee turnover costs in the hotel sector.*

Although the discourse around employee turnover in hospitality is well established, research that quantifies the financial implications of turnover remains limited. Early studies by Moreland and Wilson (1988) broadly considered the significance of labour costs in the hospitality sector but did not focus specifically on hotels. Tracey and Hinkin (2000) contributed foundational work by exploring the indirect costs of turnover, such as reduced productivity and disruption caused by onboarding new employees, while later updating these insights (2008). Despite these important contributions, actual cost estimations remained largely absent. The most notable attempt to financially quantify hotel turnover was by (M. Davidson et al., 2010), who conducted a study in the Australian hotel sector. Their findings suggested that replacing an operational-level employee costs approximately \$AUD9,591.00, while replacing an executive or managerial employee costs upwards of \$AUD 109,090. Guilding (2014) extended this research by highlighting the accountability challenges turnover poses to hotel management. However, no significant empirical research has been published since 2014 that focuses specifically on the cost of turnover in either the general hospitality or hotel sectors.

This perennial turnover and the lack of recent relevant research is concerning, given the persistent global talent shortages and the fact that labour remains the highest operational cost for hotels (Mandelbaum, 2023). To be clear, turnover and its associated costs are a global hotel industry challenge, as the above research reports, but to emphasise this point, using New Zealand as an example, hotel employee turnover is estimated to cost \$NZD218 million. This latter figure is based on STR Global's New Zealand hotel 2023 data, where total hotel labour costs are estimated at \$NZD1.09 billion, then assuming an average labour cost of 31% of total revenue (Geffroy, 2019) and a conservative estimate that turnover costs equate to 20% of labour costs, a figure cited in broader HR literature, the total cost of hotel employee turnover in New Zealand alone could be NZD 218 million annually. The figure is likely substantially higher because STR Global data represents fewer than 50% of New Zealand hotels. It is acknowledged that some level of turnover is inevitable and even strategically necessary. However, it is highly likely that a significant portion of turnover is unplanned and remains poorly managed. If just 30% of the projected turnover cost were reduced through proactive strategies, the New Zealand hotel industry could see \$NZD65 million added to profit each year.

### *2.4 Calculating the cost of employee turnover*

Several industries, such as information technology (Mitrovska & Eftimo), aviation (Kiernan, 2018), and healthcare (Li & Jones, 2013), have made significant progress in trying to establish turnover costs, recognising the strategic value of such calculations in guiding workforce planning and resource allocation. However, empirical efforts to calculate turnover costs remain scarce in the hotel sector. One of the few studies is by Davidson et al. (2010), who attempted to quantify turnover costs within the Australian hotel industry. Their work represents an important starting point but has not been replicated or expanded in other geographic or operational contexts, leaving a significant knowledge gap. Guilding et al. (2014, p 5) report that the accounting discipline may be partially responsible for this gap, noting that employee turnover costs are often overlooked or excluded from conventional accounting reporting frameworks. To explore this issue, they interviewed 26

managers across five-star hotels in Australia, including professionals from human resources, finance, food and beverage, housekeeping, and general management. Their results showed no formal systems existed within these organisations to quantify turnover costs, primarily because managers lacked the methodological expertise to do so, but even with this information, nothing was done to advance the establishment of quantification. This aligns with work by Pizam and Thornburg (2000), who reported that over 85% of HR managers had never attempted to calculate the cost of staff turnover. The absence of a systematic approach suggests that turnover remains a “hidden cost”, that is ubiquitous yet unaccounted for in operational and financial decision-making.

### Employee Turnover Cost Calculation

While extensive research on the antecedents of employee turnover and strategies to mitigate it, a consistent, industry-recognised framework for calculating the financial cost of turnover remains elusive, particularly within the hotel sector. Davidson et al. (2010) represent one of the few scholarly efforts to empirically quantify hotel employee turnover costs. Their method involved surveying hotel operators on human resource metrics, such as recruitment, onboarding, and training costs, to estimate the financial impact of turnover across different staff levels. However, their approach remains context-specific and has not been widely replicated, limiting its generalisability across the global hotel industry. In parallel, industry-based resources, such as the model proposed by Qualtrics (2025), offer more generalised turnover cost formulas applicable across sectors. This formula calculates the annual cost of turnover as: (hiring + onboarding + development + unfilled time) X number of employees x annual turnover (%). The notable difference between this model and Davidson et al.’s (2010) approach is the inclusion of “unfilled time”, a proxy for productivity losses incurred while positions remain vacant and new employees ascend the learning curve. This addition captures the intangible yet significant operational disruptions caused by turnover, such as diminished service quality, team inefficiencies, and guest dissatisfaction, which are highly salient in hotel environments.

### **3. Future research directions and implications**

Despite a rich literature on the causes and consequences of turnover, the hospitality field remains markedly underdeveloped in its exploration of financial costing frameworks. Future research should aim to bridge this critical gap through both theoretical refinement and empirical validation. The following research avenues are proposed. First, there is an urgent need to establish standardised costing models to measure hotel employee turnover costs. Future research could synthesise data from case studies, HR records, and accounting inputs to build replicable models that reflect direct and indirect costs, including lost productivity, training, and service disruption. Second, an initial qualitative approach over a quantitative method should be adopted to conduct in-depth interviews with HR professionals, general managers, and financial controllers across hotel categories (e.g. budget vs luxury) to uncover hidden cost drivers, practical barriers to costing and cultural attitudes that perpetuate acceptance of turnover.

Third, future studies should compare the cost of turnover across different countries, especially between developed and emerging hospitality markets, to reveal important contextual differences in turnover cost structures and managerial responses. Such research could inform global best practices tailored to regional labour economic conditions. Fourth, longitudinal studies can track the financial impact of retention interventions over time. Such research would provide evidence of ROI for employee engagement and retention initiatives, helping hoteliers justify strategic investments in workforce stability.

Next, future studies could explore how turnover cost metrics can be integrated into hotel performance dashboards alongside traditional KPIs like RevPAR (Revenue per available room) and GOPPAR (Gross operating profit per available room); this would encourage data-driven decision-making in talent management and budgeting to develop meaningful turnover ratios as industry benchmarks. Lastly, hospitality schools should consider embedding turnover cost analytics into hospitality finance and HR curricula. Research could evaluate the effectiveness of such pedagogical interventions in shaping future hotel leaders’ understanding of labour economics and the financial impact of employee turnover on a hotel’s bottom line.

### **4. Conclusion**

This conceptual paper has sought to reignite scholarly and industry interest in the long-overlooked issue of employee turnover financial costs within the hotel sector. While the industry has accepted high turnover as an operational norm for decades, the associated financial impact remains insufficiently explored and poorly quantified. The available literature, though rich in themes of employee satisfaction, organisational

commitment, and retention strategies, falls short in offering rigorous methodologies or validated models for measuring the actual financial burden of turnover.

The implications of uncalculated or underestimated turnover costs are profound. From recruitment and onboarding to lost productivity, disrupted team cohesion, and compromised service quality, the ripple effects of employee turnover stretch far beyond HR metrics. As shown through a conservative estimate of New Zealand's hotel industry, unplanned turnover could cost the sector over \$NZD218 million annually. If even a fraction of this loss could be retained, the benefits to training, development, retention, and ultimately profitability would be substantial. By repositioning employee turnover as not just an HR issue but a financial one, this paper argues for a fundamental shift in how hotels understand, track, and manage their labour force. Understanding turnover costs is not simply an exercise in hospitality accounting but a strategic imperative for long-term organisational resilience and competitiveness.

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