

## **Employee Turnover Reduction Strategies of Small and Medium Enterprises**



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**ABSTRACT:** Employee turnover negatively impacts small and medium enterprises (SMEs) sustainability. Grounded in the transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies SME leaders in Nigeria used to reduce employee turnover. The participants were three SME business owners who successfully reduced employee turnover. Data were collected using semi structured interviews and a review of company documents. Through thematic analysis, four themes were identified: effective leadership practices, focus on employees' working conditions, enhancing employees' competence, and implementing attractive employee benefits. The findings from this study include workable strategies SME leaders could use to reduce turnover.

**KEYWORDS:** Employee Turnover; Employee Engagement; Transformational Leadership Theory; Career Growth Opportunities; Job Stress, Burnout; Work Flexibility; Leadership Style

### **INTRODUCTION**

Employee turnover refers to the rate employees withdraw from organizational employment (Masood et al., 2020). Previous research on turnover in SMEs in Nigeria indicated that most employees leave after spending only 1 year in employment, resulting in operational instability and associated costs (Siyanbola & Gilman, 2017). Therefore, business leaders in SMEs must indicate interest in identifying and implementing strategies to retain experience, reduce employee turnover, and enhance organizational performance (Akdere & Egan, 2020; Patnaik & Dubey, 2019).

Employee turnover might be more impactful for SMEs. According to Babatunde and Laoye (2011), SMEs have a reduced capacity to withstand or survive the aftermath of business disruption because of their size. In Nigeria, the steady decline in the labor force participation rate from 76.3% in 2017 to 54.9% in 2019 portended grave danger to the growth of SMEs, which are the economic engine of growth (Amah & Oyetuunde, 2020; World Bank, 2021). Given the identified effects of employee turnover, leaders have a role to play to ensure organizational goals are achieved (Gomes et al., 2020; Stazyk & Davis, 2020).

Employees are valuable assets of any organization (Bandyopadhyay & Jadhav, 2021; Contu, 2020), and their actions or inactions have a significant impact on performance (McCrae, 2020), competitive advantage (Kerdpitak & Jermisittiparsert, 2020; Sepahvand & Khodashahri, 2021), and organizational sustainability (Al Kurdi et al., 2020). Therefore, employees contribute to the success of any business, implying that a high rate of employee turnover will result in a decline in overall business performance and may develop into a business continuity problem (Andrews & Mohammed, 2020; Wang & Sun, 2020). Given the highlighted impact of employees' activity, organizations that treat their employees improperly could lose them with the overall attendant effect on sustainability.

### **Problem Statement, Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The specific business problem was that some SME leaders lack strategies to reduce employee turnover. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that some SME leaders in Nigeria used to reduce employee turnover. The central research question for this study was: What strategies do some SME leaders use to reduce employee turnover?

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### The Transformational Leadership Framework (TFL)

The transformational leadership framework (TFL) provided a lens for me to explore strategies business leaders in SMEs can use to view the phenomenon of employee turnover. TFL is an engaging leadership style that stimulates followers' interest in organizational objectives, enhances productivity, and contributes to better corporate performance. Burns (1978) introduced the TFL concept proposing that political leaders needed to motivate followers and align their expectations with those of the parties or social systems to achieve the greater good. Bass (1985) extended the TFL noting that the shared value and motivation of the leader inspire followers to exceed set organizational targets. Bass introduced four components to explain how the transformational leader improves followers' performance: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Under individualized consideration, the transformational leader takes time to understand and relate with each employee in a personalized manner (Avolio, 1999). The personal interactions aid followers' development and sense of commitment. According to Bass (1985), the idealized influence construct makes the leader serve as a role model to followers, provide a clear vision of the organization, and gain respect and loyalty in return. As an intellectual stimulator, the leader challenges followers to think outside of the box by finding creative ways of doing things (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985; Shafi et al., 2020). The innovative work behavior of employees increases due to the leader's constant engagement and push. The transformational leader inspires collectivism through teamwork, focusing on exceeding organizational objectives (Klaic et al., 2020).

#### Employee Turnover Intention

Employee turnover intention differs from actual employee turnover. Coetzer et al. (2019) referred to employee turnover intention as the consideration of employee disengagement from an organization and noted a direct relationship between turnover intentions and eventual turnover actions. Similarly, Cao and Chen (2021) explained employee turnover intention as the predicted number of staff likely to leave the organization's employment within a specified period. Employee intention to quit often precedes employee turnover. Thus, employees who constantly think about leaving an organization's employ often leave an employment gap that may internally shock the organization (Theriou et al., 2020). Organizational leaders must promptly identify what necessitates employees' turnover intentions and immediately address them to curtail employee turnover in the organization effectively.

#### Employee Turnover

Employee turnover is the eventual loss of talented employees in an organization. Andrews and Mohammed (2020) described employee turnover as the rate workers exit an organization to seek alternative employment opportunities. Turnover measures the rate at which employers lose and replace their employees (Cao & Chen, 2021). Several reasons influence employees' turnover intentions, which usually leads to a high employee turnover if not adequately managed. Considering the negative impact of high employee turnover on other employees and organizational performance, business leaders must identify the root causes of employee turnover and proffer effective solutions for sustainable business growth and performance.

#### Employee Turnover Contributory Factors

Exiting employees have adduced reasons for leaving their respective organizations. Some of the reasons include the autocratic leadership style used by corporate leaders (Amah, 2018), job dissatisfaction (Liu & Lo, 2018), and lack of developmental opportunities (Vande Griek et al., 2020). Organizational leaders should identify and address the full range of employee turnover causative factors as much as practicable. Some factors contributing to employee turnover are highlighted next.

**Lack of Developmental Opportunities:** Career growth opportunities have been linked to employees' intentions to remain in organizations. Weng and Zhu (2020) traced the flow from career growth to job involvement, employee behavioral outcomes to job satisfaction, and ultimately the desire to stay with the organization. Similarly, Vande Griek et al. (2020) established a negative correlation between career development opportunities and employee turnover intentions. In an empirical study involving 327 frontline employees in five selected Nigerian hotels, Ohunakin et al. (2018) found a negative correlation between components of career growth opportunities and employee turnover, implying that employees will not quit if they see growth prospects in the present job. Considering that employee career expansion is beneficial to both the employee and employers (Buck, 2017), it is expedient that organizations constantly seek ways to expand career opportunities and provide clear policies on how employees can attain career growth.

**Lack of Protean Career Orientation:** An important driver of employee turnover intention is the concept of protean career orientation (PCO). According to Holtschlag et al. (2020), PCO is the degree to which self-values guide and direct individuals' career decisions. One of the critical attributes of employee PCO is commitment, a mediating factor for reducing employees' intention to leave (Oh & Koo, 2021; Redondo et al., 2021). Qureshi et al. (2019) found that employees' commitment positively relates to job

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satisfaction and that PCO, through commitment and job satisfaction, is critical to employees' long-term stay in organizations. Organizational investment in career development could positively affect the PCO of employees. Zhu et al. (2021) found that organizations that invest and provide career development plans for employees enjoy the benefit of reciprocity via enhanced attachment to the organization, increased loyalty, and enhanced PCO. In an empirical study, Lochab and Nath (2020) found that employees' proactive personality contributes significantly to PCO by enhancing self-driven and value-driven attitudes. The finding implies that employees expect organizations to project their career development and institute policies to help develop a proactive personality. Haenggli et al. (2021) underlined the significance of PCO in millennials in organizations. Also, Yuniasanti et al. (2019) noted that millennials would constitute about 35% of the workforce by 2020, and they are the highest demographic of employees with turnover intentions for various reasons. Furthermore, based on an empirical study involving 176 participants, Holtschlag et al. noted that when millennials observe high levels of organizational support, meaningful work goals, and perception of institutional career management, they stay in their roles. The finding that PCO is important to millennials is critical in managing organizational employee turnover. Business leaders must take deliberate steps to ensure employees' well-being by offering career support, setting significant work objectives, and providing career progression opportunities to enhance PCO and retain them in organizations.

**Lack of Work Flexibility:** Workplace flexibility entails allowing employees' freedom to decide on the best approach to discharge their duties toward achieving organizational objectives. Ray and Pana-Cryan (2021) noted that a flexible work environment empowers employees to choose their preferred location, time, and manner to discharge their duties. Similarly, Atiku et al. (2020) noted that flexibility in the workplace dwells on the ability and willingness to accept change, especially regarding when and how the job gets done. Choi (2020) noted that work flexibility influences employees' decisions to stay in an organization. According to Choi, organizations with flexible work arrangements enjoy less employee turnover through employee reciprocal action. Work flexibility also enables employees to balance their work life and personal life. Berkery et al. (2017) noted that employees could achieve work-life balance if the managers create a flexible work arrangement. Avgoustaki and Bessa (2019) and Davidescu et al. (2020) noted that flexible work arrangements that are employee-driven and designed to achieve work-life balance could generate a positive outcome for the organization through employee intrinsic motivation. Also, Bray et al. (2018) and Ongaki (2019) noted that by providing flexible work arrangements, organizations attract promising talents, enhance staff performance, and enable a competitive edge. Business leaders should create a flexible work arrangement to enhance employee output, improve organizational performance, and reduce turnover.

**Poor Remuneration:** Remuneration could serve as a vital factor in employee turnover intention. According to Andrews and Mohammed (2020), competitive pay, compensation, and employee benefits increase employees' satisfaction levels and propel them to become even more productive, thereby reducing intentions to leave. Similarly, in a quantitative study involving 307 participants, Koo et al. (2020) established that emotional and material rewards are pertinent to developing affective commitment, job performance, and reducing turnover intentions. Koo et al. further posited that business leaders must carefully understand an employee's perception of proposed rewards or compensation to determine what reward system would lead to employee satisfaction and retention. Remuneration could impact other considerations like employee job satisfaction, creativity, and innovation. According to Malek et al. (2020), reward structures significantly influence the development of new products and ideas because employees' creativity levels depend on the perception of equitable reward. Alhmoud and Rjoub (2019) argued that the different elements associated with total rewards would affect the decision of high performers and highly qualified employees to either stay or leave the organization. The link between remuneration and employees' decision to remain with an organization is an essential insight that employers should explore to address turnover.

**Job Stress and Burnout:** In recent times, job or work-related stress and burnout discourse have gained much attention among business leaders who associated employee quitting intentions with work-related stress and burnout, which may eventually lead to high employee turnover. Woo et al. (2019) noted that work stress and burnout significantly impact junior counseling faculty members' intent to leave their respective institutions. Woo et al. recommended pairing employees with mentors as a cushion against the effect of stress and burnout on turnover intentions. Similarly, Liu and Lo (2018) noted that excess workload, exhaustion, and cynicism are significantly and negatively associated with job satisfaction and turnover intentions. The negative impact of stress and burnout on turnover intentions with job satisfaction mediating the relationship provides a guide as to how business leaders can address the issues toward reducing employee turnover. According to Kaushal (2019), work stress impacts work-life balance, employee performance, and organizational success. Kaushal posited that organizations that effectively deal with work-stress variables enjoy a highly productive and satisfied workforce. Leitao et al. (2021) noted that all the factors affecting the impact of quality work-life hygiene and burnout demotivators have direct/indirect relationships with productivity contributions. Job stress can also affect the mental well-being of employees. Mensah (2021) noted that low job control, high job demand, and reward

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imbalance cause stress, affecting employees' mental well-being. Mensah found a direct and significant impact between job stress and working adults' mental health, with a higher magnitude effect on women than men. Law et al. (2020) found that workplace stress resulted in a decrease in employee autonomy and recommended that leaders identify and address workplace stress sources to improve employees' mental health. Given the far-reaching impact of stress on employee turnover intentions, business leaders should focus on designing work-friendly policies to reduce stress and employee burnout in the workplace.

**Low Employee Engagement:** The level of employee engagement has attracted the increased interest of business leaders who linked low employee engagement to adverse organizational outcomes such as employee turnover. According to Cao and Chen (2021), despite organizations' inability to infuse resilience in workers, leaders can curtail employees' intentions to leave by showing empathy, keeping employees engaged, and reducing employees' stress levels by providing them with adequate working tools. Similarly, Albrecht and Marty (2020) noted that employees' turnover intentions are directly affected by personality traits through the mediating roles of work engagement, self-efficacy, and affective commitment. Organizational citizenship behavior is an effective strategy that business leaders could use to enhance employee engagement and overall performance. Jiang et al. (2017) noted that organizational citizenship behavior positively and significantly influences sustainable employee performance through staff engagement and promoting team spirit. In addition, Hai et al. (2020) indicated that perceived or experienced HR practices reflect the organization's investment in its employees, motivating employees for improved engagement, performance, and organizational citizenship behavior. Leadership style is another effective strategy that business leaders could use to enhance employee engagement and organizational performance. Theriou et al. (2020) posited that employee engagement moderates ethical leadership, leadership effectiveness, and turnover intention. Similarly, Amah (2018) noted that the relationship between leadership style and employee engagement is not direct but mediated through boundary variables such as employee voice and perception of organizational support. Amah and Oyetuunde (2020) noted that creating a work environment where employees can express themselves without fear could positively impact employee career growth through servant leadership. Ohunakin et al. (2018) inferred that the ability of organizational leaders to retain their frontline employees and reduce employee turnover depends on the identified dimensions of career growth opportunities, which is only possible through employee engagement. The preceding implies that with career growth, employees are willing to surpass expectations through enhanced productivity and work engagements.

**Lack of Transformational Leadership:** Business leaders exhibit different leadership styles with varying impacts on employees' behavior and the decision to stay with or leave an organization. Masood et al. (2020) conducted an empirical study on the impact of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and turnover intentions. Masood et al. found that the transformational leadership style had the most profound positive effect in increasing OCB and decreasing employees' turnover intentions. Tian et al. (2020) confirmed the impact of leadership style on OCB and turnover intentions but introduced the need for constant communication between leaders and employees. Specifically, leaders that adopt the transformational leadership style inspire employees to bring out their best performance, support their well-being, and increase their interest in the organization. In an empirical study involving 140 respondents, Abasilim et al. (2019) found that the transformational leadership style positively related to employee commitment to the organization. Similarly, in another empirical study with 302 participants, Hussein and Yesiltas (2020) found that the transformational leadership style positively mediated the relationship between employees' emotional intelligence, counterwork behavior, and organizational commitment. The transformational leader essentially enhances employees' performance and reduces adverse behaviors. Djourova et al. (2020) found that transformational leaders enhance employees' self-efficacy and self-confidence through inspirational motivation resulting in better employee well-being. With the demonstrated impact of transformational leadership on employees' commitment, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and well-being, business leaders could implement a workable strategy for developing transformational leadership skills in managers who must understand how to inspire employees and earn commitment and loyalty.

## METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that some SME leaders in Nigeria used to reduce employee turnover. The qualitative methodology was used for the current study on employee turnover. According to Stutterheim and Ratcliffe (2021), researchers use qualitative methodology to explore complex phenomena by engaging relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, qualitative methodology allows researchers to gain deeper insights into how individuals view a phenomenon using open-ended questions (Busetto et al., 2020; Wohlfart, 2020; Yin, 2018). The qualitative approach was appropriate for the current study because it offers a more profound understanding of a complex phenomenon and interviewed business leaders using open-ended questions.

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A case study design has a flexible mode of investigation and allows the researcher to explore a phenomenon in a real-life setting (Siedlecki, 2020). Given that evidence obtained from multiple case locations are more compelling and make case studies more robust (Sadeghi Moghadam et al., 2021; Yin, 2018), the multiple case study design was more appropriate to explore strategies some SME leaders in the finance industry used to reduce employee turnover.

The population for this study consisted of three SME owners from three SME companies in the finance industry in Lagos State, Nigeria, who successfully implemented strategies to reduce employee turnover. Purposeful sampling was applied to select the three SME owners. Each owner received and signed a consent form after which face-to-face semi-structured interviews were scheduled to collect data. Participant authorization was obtained to record each interview session to ensure data transcription accuracy. The extraction of relevant information from company documents served as the second data source resulting in the methodological triangulation of data. This was in line with De Andrade et al. (2018) and Yin (2018) who noted that company documents might serve as a rich data source and complement other data sources.

To achieve reliability in the current study, member checking was conducted by requesting participants' validation of data interpretation summary. Member checking being participants self-confirming activities helps mitigate researcher bias enhancing the dependability of research outcomes (McSweeney, 2021; Varpio et al., 2017). After transcribing each interview, a summary of each transcript containing significant insights was prepared and emailed to each participant ahead of the member checking interview sessions subsequently conducted.

Also, an interview protocol was deployed to achieve uniformity across each interview session. The interview protocol is a written guide containing the interview questions, the process for member checking, and other nuances relating to the interviewing process (Hoover et al., 2018). A well-prepared interview protocol contributed to the reliability and validity of research by ensuring the researcher adopts a uniform and consistent approach during the data collection stage of the study. To achieve methodological triangulation, company documents provided were reviewed as secondary data sources.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-staged thematic analysis model and the NVivo software were used for data analysis. Accordingly, data familiarization was achieved by repeatedly reading the transcribed interview data to gain deeper insights. Second, using the NVivo software, data was organized, and initial codes were assigned to recurring patterns. According to Swygart-Hobaugh (2019), researchers use data analysis software to ensure data analysis robustness and to provide evidence toward data saturation achievement. Third, initial codes were reviewed and NVivo was used to group codes to form different themes that explained aspects of the research question. In the fourth and fifth stages, similar themes were grouped, realigned as required, named, and associated characteristics defined, and a report on research findings was presented in the sixth stage.

Achieving data saturation further strengthens research reliability and validity. Data saturation is the point in the data collection process when additional data do not result in new meaningful themes thereby implying the possibility of replication by other researchers (Guest et al., 2020; Hennink et al., 2019; Mpofu, 2021). A three-step approach was adopted to achieve data saturation: (a) The selection and interviewing of participants with experience in reducing employee turnover; (b) The use of methodological triangulation in which organizational documents serve as a second data source; and (c) The adoption of member checking procedure by requesting participants to validate data interpretation. Data saturation occurred after the third interview as no new meaningful theme emerged.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The overarching research question for this study was the following: What strategies do some SME leaders use to reduce employee turnover? Thematic analysis of data collected from interviews and company documents revealed that the three SME leaders who participated in the research successfully used four practical approaches to minimize employee turnover in their respective organizations. The approaches or themes, the associated frequencies, and corresponding percentages are presented in Table 1:

**Table 1: Emerged Themes and Frequencies**

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Effective leadership practices	87	29.90%
Focus on employees' working conditions	85	29.21%
Focus on enhancing employees' competence	65	22.34%
Implementing attractive employee benefits	54	18.55%
Total	291	100%



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### Theme 1: Effective Leadership Practices

The utilization of leadership practices emerged as an effective strategy that the three participants used to reduce employee turnover. The participants stressed the importance of leadership practices such as proper communication, policies to guide organizational practices, open and transparent leadership actions, and discipline to ensure employee commitment (see Table 2) to reduce employee turnover in their respective organizations.

**Table 2: Effective Leadership Practices Subthemes and Frequencies**

Subtheme	Frequency	Percentage
Communication	25	28.74%
Effective policies	20	22.99%
Open leadership actions	33	37.93%
Discipline	9	10.34%
Total	87	100%

R01, R02, and R03 commented on using communication to reduce turnover. For instance, R01 stated

The number one step to meet all these challenges is consistent communication and information gathering through surveys. We always communicate and gather information from time to time; that one is vital because it is when we have all this data that we can work to meet the challenges. We analyze the feedback critically to identify the root cause.

Similarly, for R02 “being able to explain why you are taking some certain decisions as an organization” helps retain employee confidence. In agreement, R03 explained that “for every staff working for us, he knows he can go back home with something at the end of the month.” The participants used practical communication skills to gain employees’ attention, commitment, and loyalty to the organization.

Regarding policy documentation, R01 and R02 were quite vocal. R01 noted that “we have a lot of policies in place, anti-bullying, how to make the workplace a friendly place to work in, and how to make ourselves like a family ... all these helps improve staff performance and reduce employee turnover,” and R02 cited some policy examples such as “welfare packages, health plan ... so, all these things are things that have endeared our staff to the organization.” In contrast, R03 was silent, but R01 and R02 fully engaged with policy documentation to ensure adherence to operational standards and fairness within their case populations.

R01 and R03 are proactive in taking leadership actions to enhance employee commitment, foster good working relationships, and engender creativity within their respective organizations. R01 stated “we try to talk to those involved to see how things can improve. We monitor the status quo, you know, and ensure that rendition of the strategies is sustainable,” insisting on performance improvement. For R03, “it became imperative for each of us to begin to look outward instead of confining ourselves inward” in revenue generation to ensure the sustainability of the wage bill. Leaders must be involved in charting the course and stimulating employees to better performance, an approach supported by R01 and R03.

R02 highlighted the enforcement of discipline within an organization as a crucial strategy to prevent a gradual degrading of values due to noncompliance with organizational policies. In this regard, R02 cited an instance noting that

but if you now find serial offenders, of course, you need to let them go. We also had the example of a lady that works in our operations department, and she was found guilty of some things, and after we had warned her repeatedly, we had to let her go. So, we are also not shy to fire people when they are not complying, and the attitude is not that of, I want to change so that they also don’t pollute the organization, we need to be able to let them go.

However, R02 advocated a balanced approach to implementing disciplinary procedures: “So, it’s not all about sanctions. When we need to apply sanctions, we do apply sanctions,” but employees must be made aware of violations and the rationale for the sanctions.

Leaders are responsible for motivating employees to be committed to the organization and to perform better on the job. The four transformational leadership dimensions (inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) are adaptable to galvanize employees’ actions toward achieving organizational success (Bass, 1985; Zainab et al., 2022). The theme of effective leadership practices ties into the conceptual framework because the different subthemes include either one or a combination of the framework’s dimensions. For instance, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulations are drivers of effective communication and open, transparent leadership (Okoli et al., 2021; Tian et al., 2020). Also, through idealized influence, employees respect leaders and take them as role models. When such leaders comply with organizational rules, the employees will also comply, maintaining discipline within the workforce. Though no link was established between this theme

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and the individualized consideration component of the framework, effective leadership practice includes at least three dimensions of the transformational leadership style and was a primary strategy used by participants in this study to reduce employee turnover. Leadership practices such as communication, effective policies, leadership actions, and discipline drive employee commitment and loyalty, making them stay longer with an organization. Leaders with competent communication abilities and good listening skills reduce employee confusion, increase job satisfaction, and reduce turnover intentions (Ramos Salazar, 2022; Tedone & Bruk-Lee, 2022). Also, positive leadership actions such as motivating, nurturing, appreciating, and serving as role models to employees promote good working relationships and help to reduce turnovers in organizations (Romi et al., 2022). Furthermore, when leaders enforce discipline, organizational goals are attained faster, the working environment becomes more conducive, and employee job satisfaction increases, thereby providing a better chance of retaining employees (Ong et al., 2021; Reynaldo et al., 2022). Finally, Al Muharraq et al. (2022) found that workplace bullying is a precursor to employee turnover intention and suggested the documentation and implementation of anti-bullying policies to reduce employee exits. The first theme on leadership practices and its associated subthemes aligned with the contents of recent research on approaches to reduce employee turnover.

### Theme 2: Focus on Employees' Working Conditions

The three participants underscored the essential role that employees' working conditions play in creating a happy and motivated workforce. Putting together the insights from the data, the participants emphasized the physical and emotional work conditions under the four subthemes presented in Table 3. When the working conditions are employee friendly, staff retention is higher and, conversely, turnover is reduced.

**Table 3: Focus on Employees' Working Conditions and Frequencies**

Subtheme	Frequency	Percentage
Empathy	32	37.64%
Healthy relationships	18	21.18%
Work-life balance	17	20.00%
Conducive environment	18	21.18%
Total	85	100%

The emotional aspect of employees' working conditions, referred to in this study as empathy, emerged as the most prevalent strategy that all participants used to reduce employee turnover. R01, R02, and R03 described their concern for employees' feelings, consideration for personal convenience, support for their well-being, and interest in their living conditions. In demonstrating his position on the subject, R01 commented that "as against the tradition in Nigeria where most people resume by 8:00 o'clock, we try to do 9:00 am so that they can have enough time to rest and wade or pass through the traffic." For R02, going personal with employees and making them feel loved even when they make mistakes is crucial to building a competent workforce loyal to the organization: "When people do make errors or do things that they shouldn't do, they are corrected in love and properly and that also helps them not to want to do such again." R03 considers the family of employees by ensuring consistent salary payment, noting that "the major strategy has been this consistency in the payment of salaries, not putting the staff under serious pressure at home and in the workplace."

Promoting healthy relationships whereby employees maintain friendship and respect among themselves was another turnover reduction strategy deployed by two participants. The subtheme entailed making employees comfortable with each other, reducing the possibility of workplace victimization, having close ties, and understanding the dynamics of optimizing the performance of generation Z employees. R01 stated "another thing is that we do this kind of a team bonding from time to time where our employees meet outside work to relax, have fun, and know more about themselves." Continuing, R01 posited that employees would stay with the organization once the working relationship with their bosses is cordial, stating that "one thing I noticed is that employees don't just leave an organization and employees don't just work for an organization, they work for their bosses and they leave because of their bosses most times." R02 was specific about the younger members of the workforce, observing that working with this generation, I think they are called generation Z, people between 18-30 or thereabout, they are very fast, they are not patient, they also have a lot of energy. So, if as a leader you can harness that energy, you will be able to achieve so much. The result, according to R03, is that employees stay longer with the firm: "We have been able to keep this one for almost ten years now."

Another subtheme that emerged was the need for organizations to promote work-life balance, whereby the organization considers the totality of employees' being and does not treat them only as working tools. According to R02, the last one I will talk about is the work-life balance. As much as possible they are here to work but we also appreciate the fact that they have families, they have

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things that are also important to them apart from the work, so we try to make the environment very conducive for them by ensuring that they are not overworked.

In agreement, R01 stated that “another thing that we do is we try to maintain a work-life balance.” Employees appreciate organizations in which they have time and opportunities to explore other aspects of life and they stay longer in such systems. R02 retorted “so, that way they have seen that it is not just about the job. We care about their personal lives, we care about their families, we care about the job,” and that is the strategy that endears employees to organizations.

The subtheme of a conducive environment emerged as an employee turnover reduction strategy used by all participants in my study. The participants described a conducive environment in terms of locational convenience, ambiance, nontoxicity, and availability of technology resources to promote flexible work arrangements. For R02, the office environment must be very conducive in agreement with R03, who stated that the “provision of the conducive office environment had been another factor. When you are looking for office accommodation, it must be presentable for you, your staff, your clients, and other stakeholders.” R01 puts it as making the workplace a friendly environment with a measure of flexibility. For R02 and R03, appropriate technology tools could facilitate such flexibility. According to R03, the basic and strongest tool in that minimum operating standard is technology, so technology is a key factor. Whatever you are giving your staff to make them work very well for you and then providing a conducive work environment is the idea of technology.

R02 concurred with the impact of technology in achieving a flexible work arrangement and cited the example of a staff member who had traveled abroad for her postgraduate degree and “would have had to resign and leave whereas there was still so much value we could derive from her being in the organization.”

Focus on employee working conditions derives from the leader having due consideration for employees’ well-being tying into individualized consideration and, to some extent, inspirational motivation dimensions of the transformational leadership conceptual framework. Through individualized consideration leadership, organizations pay attention to followers’ needs and care for them, whereas the inspirational motivator enhances the engagement and performance of followers (Al-Nawafah et al., 2022; Ayalp, 2022; Kurniawati & Sulaeman, 2022). For instance, empathy is a set of affective relationship practices linked to transformational leadership whereby the leader seeks to understand employees’ positionality, and offer unique or general solutions, thereby building commitment and enhancing employee performance levels (Arghode et al., 2022; Jian, 2022). Also, employees would ordinarily reciprocate care extended by showing respect to impactful leaders and holding them in high esteem (Lazăr et al., 2022). The aftermath of implementing the theme ties into the idealized influence dimension of the conceptual model used for this study. The theme of focusing on employee working conditions align with three transformational leadership dimensions (individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence).

The working conditions put in place by an organization plays a crucial role in employees’ decision to stay or quit. Organizations that focus on employee working conditions like availability of work-life balance programs, low-level job stress, and empathetic leadership style tend to enhance employee engagement and job satisfaction levels and ultimately reduce employee turnover rate (Hasan et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022). Recent research confirmed the relationship between employee working conditions and turnover intentions. Therefore, leaders and organizations should institute workable programs and policies to provide employees with work-life balance and due consideration for their personal needs and comfort.

A healthy working relationship between employees creates a conducive working environment contributing to turnover reduction. Quality interpersonal interactions at work, especially between peer coworkers, have a multi-dimensional impact on employees, resulting in trust build-up, emotional attachment, better well-being, enhanced productivity, and the decision to remain with the organization (Hanafin et al., 2022; Tetteh et al., 2022; Winarno et al., 2022). For Brown et al. (2022), the lack of healthy relationships could result in employee cynicism making the workplace unconducive and escalating turnover intentions from individual to collective levels. Organization leaders should realize the role of quality employee relationships in reducing employee turnover and provide platforms for promoting employee interactions.

### Theme 3: Focus on Enhancing Employees’ Competence

The third theme that emerged was the need to enhance employees’ competence. All three participants agreed to at least two subthemes, with R01, R02, and R03 commenting on four, three, and two subthemes, respectively. The four subthemes are presented in Table 4. Competent employees are confident, exhibit good performance, and are committed to the organization, rendering competence enhancement a good strategy for reducing employee turnover.



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**Table 4: Focus on Enhancing Employees' Competence and Frequencies**

Subtheme	Frequency	Percentage
Employee fitness for the job	11	16.92%
Robust job description	6	9.23%
Training	22	33.85%
Employee engagement	26	40.00%
Total	65	100%

All three participants discussed the importance of person-job fit as an approach to enhance staff productivity and desire to stay with the organization. R01 and R02 described their recruitment process as intentionally searching for the best individuals whose qualifications fit the intended role's requirements. Upon asking R02 to provide further explanation, she retorted "we ensure that we recruit the best talent, you know, at the point of bringing staff into the organization so that we don't have staff turnover." R01 concurred, stating "it starts from the beginning as to how employee came in." In alignment, R03 availed the staff handbook, highlighting the procedure for recruiting the right employees. Again, R01 and R02 insisted on introducing a robust onboarding process to help new employees settle in and hone their skills. According to R02, what we also do is when any new staff comes in, we do a very comprehensive induction training for them which I as the MD take by myself taking them through how the organization started, the journey so far, where we are, what our values are, what our goals are, what the culture is, just basically everything they will need to know to fit in into the organization.

Proper documentation of each role's required tasks could define an employer's expectations and aid the employee's plan to upskill competence level. R01 and R02 insisted that organizations could set up employees for career failure and hence organizational exits by not delineating job requirements. R02 was the most vocal on the subtheme stating that "the other thing we tried to do was to ensure that we enriched the job description so that staff are not expected to do mundane things." The essence of a complete job description is to stimulate employees to improve performance, enhance their level of commitment, and increase the likelihood of staying with the organization. R01 emphasized the need for employees "to know what is expected of them according to their job description" to plan execution strategy properly.

When asked to explain how a robust job description resulted in employee retention, R02 responded that enriched job description, when you give a man certain role to perform and, in that role, he needs something to look up to, explore, and learn more about, you will find out that endears them, because then they are just not doing routine things every day.

All the participants agreed that organizations must train to build employee competencies and capacity, enhancing career prospects and the desire to stay with the organization. The participants commented on the need for training to be inclusive, expansive, organization-initiated, employee-initiated, and regular. R01 noted "we send employees on different kinds of trainings," and provided evidence of payment for some external training courses as further support. For R02, training is a critical activity beneficial to employees and the organization training for us is very key. You know, there is no amount of money that we spare in terms of training our people because at the end of the day, they are better for it as individuals, and then the organization also gets the value for that training.

R03 associated lack of training to possible staff turnover stating "you need to improve on their training too while they are working with you. So, if you don't improve, of course, some other people will try to take advantage of them." Also, R01 and R02 provided opportunities for interdepartmental knowledge sharing, whereby employees train one another monthly. The participants provided training documents and company training policies as corroborating pieces of evidence.

Two participants, R01 and R02, commented about using engagement practices to stimulate employees' interest in their respective organizations. Putting together insights provided, R01 and R02 referred to employee engagement as a full range of organizational activities, including constant interaction between leaders and employees, involving employees in decision making, and looking out for employees' well-being. The outcome is that employees feel valued and become increasingly comfortable staying with the organizations. R01 commented "employee engagement whereby employees have the opportunity of giving us information about the organization, who they work with, what pains them on the job, what they want improved, and how much they are enjoying their job." R02 supported the need for consistent interactions noting that "you need to keep engaging them. Like I said, they need engagement; they are very young and fast, so you need to keep drawing them back and engaging them." Continuing, R02 highlighted two essential outcomes of engaging with employees; inquisitiveness and improved creativity, which enhances commitment and performance leading to employees' desire to remain with the organization. R01 and R02 provided relevant documents to back up the information provided.

Rais et al. (2022) traced how transformational leaders develop employees' competence by providing learning opportunities resulting in capacity enhancement, an activity in intellectual stimulation. Furthermore, through inspirational motivation,

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transformational leaders drive work engagement increasing employees' affective commitment to an organization resulting in improved use of self-passion and enhancing performance (Bakker et al., 2022; Tongkachok et al., 2022). Also, the participants' strategy of ensuring employee fitness for the job ties into the individualized consideration dimension of the transformational leadership framework. Xu et al. (2022) found transformational leadership positively impacted person-job fit to the extent of the leader's ability to manipulate an employee's competence against the role's requirement. By considering the appropriateness of the job descriptions, transformational leaders exhibit consideration for employees' sense of belonging, making their roles meaningful and impactful, thereby enhancing job satisfaction (López-Cabarcos et al., 2022; Schermuly et al., 2022). The subthemes under this theme aligned with the transformational leadership dimensions (intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation).

Developing competent employees results in better job satisfaction and benefits the organization because the loss of experienced hands reduces. Employee training triggers a series of work engagement-related activities including enhanced job commitment and improved performance, resulting in employees developing affective bonds with the organization, thus reducing the turnover rate (Lyons & Bandura, 2022; Winarno et al., 2022). Organizations cannot overemphasize the importance of training in accentuating positive employee attitudes. Therefore, organizational leaders should provide learning and training opportunities to enhance employees' capacity as a panacea to employee turnover.

Organizations should hire individuals qualified for the job with properly delineated activities to enhance employee comfort level with the job and prevent early exit. By adequately designing work content, organizations prepare the basis to match potential employees' qualifications and interests with role requirements, thereby ensuring a person-job fit and resulting in employee work engagement, loyalty, and increased willingness to stay with the organization (Dalgıç, 2022; Wan & Duffy, 2022). The insight suggests that organizations should conduct periodic role auditing exercises to review and update work content in the bid to ensure continuous person-job fit, enhance organizational commitment, and reduce employee turnover.

### Theme 4: Implementing Attractive Employee Benefits

The fourth theme that emerged from data analysis was implementing attractive employee benefits and there were two subthemes namely, remuneration and recognition and career planning and growth (see Table 5). All participants commented on the strategic use of the subthemes to reduce employee turnover rate.

**Table 5: Implementing Attractive Employee Benefits and Frequencies**

Subtheme	Frequency	Percentage
Career planning and growth	22	40.74%
Remuneration and recognition	32	59.26%
Total	54	100%

R01, R02, and R03 emphasized the role of financial and non-financial incentives in keeping employees happy and stimulating their interest in the organization. All participants alluded to the importance and effectiveness of wages being competitive, consistent, and benchmarked against inflation for financial incentives. R03 was the most insistent and commented "truly the thing that was keeping and sustaining our company in terms of turnover was the effective remuneration strategy which the company has actually hinges upon over the years." To justify the effectiveness of adequate and consistent wages, R03 cited examples of two employees who have spent over ten years and are still in the country. In support, R02 commented "the other one which is also major is remuneration, ensuring that our staff are well-remunerated. We do this by benchmarking against the big players in our industry to attract the best from that sector." For R01, the financial incentives should not be limited to monthly salaries but could include periodic payment of cost-of-living-adjustment allowances and bonuses. Also, R01 noted that competitive wages "gives employees' total commitment to their jobs and they are so appreciative, they trust the organization, and they will always want to give their best."

Again, the three participants highlighted the importance of non-financial incentives by appreciating employees, letting them know they are highly valued, and acknowledging their contributions to the organization. R01 used "high performer", while R02 referred to accomplished, intelligent, and dedicated employees. R03 praised his employees as competent, professional, and sought-after. Such recognition endeared employees to their respective organizations.

To remain with the organization, employees must have a sense of growth in their respective careers. All participants agreed that organizational leaders are responsible for planning and catering to employees' careers. According to R01, once "they can see the career path, most employees will not ordinarily leave." Continuing, R01 highlighted employees' expectations not to remain static and advised leaders to put in place a robust career plan such that employees could become more attached and stay longer with

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the organization. For R02, career planning entailed developing employees to grow in the organization. She cited the example of an employee who the organization placed on a development path “though now he hasn’t done his certifications as an accountant, he has really grown, and that has kept him, and he was one of our pioneer staff, and he is still with us till today.” R03 commented on the need to maintain staff and appropriately plan for career advancement to ensure their longevity in the organization. As support, R02 and R03 provided their staff handbook, which outlined career path planning.

Transformational leaders maintain close contact by identifying employee needs, inspiring personal growth by challenging them to greater productivity, deploying coaching, and propelling them to more excellent performance (Ausat et al., 2022; Tongkachok et al., 2022). Also, leaders who give due recognition to employees exhibit personal care and inspire employees to optimum performance. To enhance performance and commitment to the organization, leaders could implement appreciation programs using recognition to satisfy employees’ self-esteem and ego needs (Tingo & Mseti, 2022; Yang et al., 2022). Liu and Liu (2022) found a linear flow from employee motivation to improved job performance and better employee loyalty attributing the flow’s success to the positive transformational leadership action of providing adequate financial incentives. By attending to the needs of employees, coaching them to succeed on the job, and challenging them to superior performance to achieve career growth, implementing attractive employee benefits tied to the four transformational leadership dimensions.

Implementing attractive employee benefits like competitive remuneration and career development motivate employees to remain committed and loyal to an organization. Leaders who focus on ensuring attractive employee benefits reduce employee unhappiness and turnover intentions (Arghode et al., 2022; Romi et al., 2022). For instance, Al Balushi et al. (2022) noted that effective career planning is the best way to motivate employees and keep them committed to the organization, thereby reducing their likelihood of quitting. Also, compensating employees with attractive remuneration commensurate with their job roles enhances their performance and loyalty, which translates to overall organizational performance and desire to stay with the organization (Fulmer & Li, 2022; Ihinmoyan, 2022; Lyons & Bandura, 2022). Furthermore, acknowledging employees’ efforts through recognitions and awards makes employees feel appreciated, thereby enhancing performance and intentions to stay (Tingo & Mseti, 2022). The theme of implementing attractive employee benefits and its associated subthemes aligned with the position of recent literature on employee turnover reduction strategies.

### Applications to Professional Practice

The applications to professional practice entail offering SME leaders practical strategies to reduce employee turnover. My research findings apply to professional business practices in the SME industry because it explains the deliberate steps that SME leaders could use to stimulate and enhance employees’ interest as a strategy to keep them engaged, motivated, and happy to remain with the organization. Engaging and retaining the best organizational employees is a significant factor in maximizing customer satisfaction and the organization’s profitability. Obtaining and sustaining business success depends on the ability of the organization to retain its best employees (Gani et al., 2022; Krishna & Garg, 2022). SME leaders must identify and understand the best strategies to reduce employee turnover. The critical insights acquired from the three SME owners who established a track record of retaining their best hands and reducing employee turnover are valuable to the existing body of knowledge on employee turnover reduction strategies.

The information obtained from these experienced participants on how they used transformational leadership dimensions and other deliberate strategies to reduce turnover and maximize employee productivity within their respective organizations could apply to other SME businesses. Organizations adopting a transformational leadership approach could experience enhanced employee citizenship behaviors and lower turnover rates (Al-Nawafah et al., 2022; Sihotang, 2022). Also, this study’s findings confirmed that organizational leaders could reduce employee turnover using one or a combination of the four transformational leadership dimensions (individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence). Organization leaders could utilize the four main themes derived from data analysis (effective leadership practices, focus on working conditions, enhancing employees’ competence, and implementing attractive employee benefits) to promote a conducive environment and reduce turnover. This study aimed to educate business leaders and stakeholders on the possibility of using transformational leadership style to enhance employees’ enthusiasm and keep them engaged and motivated, thereby minimizing employee turnover.

Employee turnover is harmful to organizational continuity. Li et al. (2022) noted that corporate continuity is dependent on the leader’s ability to retain good employees. Using the four emergent themes from this study, which are proven strategies utilized by three SME owners, could help other SME companies reduce the costly effects of voluntary turnover and increase profitability and business continuity. Also, by using the transformational leadership dimensions, SME leaders could influence employees to stay through transparent communication, effective policies, and open leadership.

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### Recommendations for Further Research

Three SME business owners from three companies in Lagos State, Nigeria, who had successfully reduced employee turnover in their respective organizations were interviewed. Future qualitative researchers could interview more SME business owners to gain more relevant insights to address the possibility of a lack of robust knowledge that could bias the data. Also, to address the geographic and demographic limitation whereby all participants reside in Lagos, Nigeria, future researchers could consider adding at least another location to contrast findings. The final recommendation is that future researchers adopt a quantitative methodology to examine the relationships between each theme that emerged in this study and employee turnover.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that some SME leaders in Nigeria used to reduce employee turnover. Employee turnover significantly affects SME businesses' employee morale, efficiency, and profitability. The loss of experienced staff with crucial roles for successful operations negatively impacts productivity and replacing them comes at a high cost. Therefore, SME leaders must understand the best possible strategies to motivate employees and enhance their satisfaction with the job as a precursor to keeping them longer in the organization.

In this study, participants adopted the transformational leadership style, focusing on improving employee working conditions, enhancing their competence, and implementing attractive benefits, rewards, and recognition. To institutionalize the emergent themes toward reducing employee turnover in their respective organizations, SME leaders could develop a management system framework with human resources-oriented strategic themes based on this study's findings and the application of the transformational leadership dimensions. This recommendation will equip SME leaders with the know-how to deploy sustainable employee practices with staff retention initiatives as critical performance metrics.

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