

Improving Employee Retention through Flexible Work Arrangements: A Quasi-Experimental Study of the Self-Scheduling Model and Rotational Shift Selection at Qingting Coffee Chain Stores in Nanping, China

Zhi Wang ^{1,2,*}, Beni Widarman Yus Kelana ¹, Xuemin Mou ³ and Siran She ⁴

¹ Azman Hashim International Business School, University Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 Skudai Johor, 81310, Malaysia

² School of Economics and Management, Yango University, Fuzhou, Fujian, 350015, China

³ Sichuan Geely University of China, Chengdu, Sichuan, 641423, China

⁴ Nantong Institute of Technology, Nantong, Jiangsu, 226001, China

* Correspondence author: vnickwz@163.com

Abstract: Small service enterprises face a persistent "high mobility, low barriers" employment problem. This study examines whether flexible work arrangements improve employee retention in this setting. A quasi-experimental study was conducted in two chain stores of Qingting Coffee in Nanping, China: the experimental store (n = 12) implemented a combined "Self-Scheduling Model + Rotational Shift Selection" intervention for six months, while the control store (n = 14) kept fixed scheduling. Retention was measured with a 15-item scale (organizational commitment, work engagement, and reverse-scored turnover intention) at baseline, three months, and six months, together with the observed retention rate at six months. The two groups were nearly equal at baseline (42.71 vs. 41.67 on a 15-75 point scale). After six months, the experimental group scored 50.67 versus 44.07, and the retention intention difference was statistically significant ($t(24) = -2.68$, $p = .013$, Cohen's $d = -1.06$), while the observed retention rate was 91.67% versus 64.29%, in the expected direction but not statistically significant at this sample size (Fisher's exact test, $p = .170$). Scheduling autonomy for frontline service employees is therefore associated with higher retention intention, with observed retention moving in the same direction. The findings offer a reference for small chain service enterprises seeking to reduce turnover through flexible work arrangements.

Keywords: Employee retention; flexible work arrangements; Self-Scheduling Model; Rotational Shift Selection; quasi-experimental design

1. Introduction

For service enterprises, employee retention is a core human resource management outcome: it reduces recruitment and training costs and stabilizes daily operations [1-2]. Among the factors that influence retention, work arrangements are among the most direct. In smaller cities such as Nanping, where the pace of life is relatively slow, flexible work arrangements can meet employees' individual needs, improve work efficiency, and support work-life balance, bringing long-term benefits to stores [3-4].

Among flexible work arrangements, the Self-Scheduling Model and Rotational Shift Selection are two common forms. Under the Self-Scheduling Model, employees choose their schedules within the overall framework of the store's staffing needs, taking into account their own life rhythm and personal



needs [5-6]. Under Rotational Shift Selection, the store sets the overall shift rules and employees choose shifts according to those rules [7-8]. Both arrangements give employees choice and increase their sense of control over scheduling [9-10]. Flexible arrangements also require self-management, including clear goals, time planning, and self-discipline [11-13], and they encourage employees to learn new skills so that they can adapt to changing schedules [14-15].

Empirical studies generally report that flexible work arrangements are associated with lower turnover. Longitudinal evidence from US federal agencies shows that organizations with more remote workers have lower voluntary turnover rates [16], and reviews conclude that flexible arrangements improve work-life balance, job satisfaction, and retention [17]. Similar findings have been reported in manufacturing [18] and banking [19]. Mechanism studies indicate that flexible work is associated with higher work control and work engagement, which relate to lower turnover intention [20], although its adoption depends on workplace cultural norms [21]. A flexible working environment also helps enterprises attract, motivate, and retain talent [22], and employers increasingly rely on flexibility to address labor shortages [23]. Comparable positive associations have been reported in non-governmental organizations [24] and in structural analyses emphasizing digital leadership [25].

Sector-specific studies report comparable patterns. In commercial banks, flexible arrangements explain about one fifth of the variance in employee turnover [26]; flexible work improves employees' ability to balance work and personal responsibilities [27] and is positively associated with perceived productivity, work quality, and organizational commitment [28]. Retention benefits have been documented among Generation Z employees [29], in qualitative studies of employee engagement [30], and in the power and utilities industry, where job satisfaction mediates the effect [31]. The evidence is not uniform, however. Tsen argued that social exchange theory and boundary theory predict opposite outcomes depending on implementation [32]. Wahba et al. linked flexible arrangements to employee well-being and lower turnover intention but stressed multi-level conditions [33]. Khan et al. found that flexibility matters mainly when work pressure is high [34], and Caillier found no significant overall effect of flexible schedules on turnover in US federal agencies [35]. Three gaps remain in this literature. First, existing studies focus mainly on remote working and flextime in large organizations, banks, and public agencies; evidence from small chain service enterprises in smaller Chinese cities is scarce. Second, few studies isolate scheduling autonomy as the active ingredient, and the combined use of the Self-Scheduling Model and Rotational Shift Selection has rarely been tested. Third, most studies rely on cross-sectional surveys of turnover intention, and few track retention intention and observed retention over time with a comparison group. To address these gaps, this study proposes two hypotheses. H1: the combined "Self-Scheduling Model + Rotational Shift Selection" intervention is associated with higher employee retention intention scores than traditional fixed scheduling. H2: the intervention is associated with a higher observed employee retention rate.

This study focuses on the employees of the Qingting Coffee chain stores in Nanping City. It examines the between-store differences in retention intention and observed retention rate following the "Self-Scheduling Model + Rotational Shift Selection" intervention, and provides a reference for small service enterprises seeking to reduce employee turnover.

2. Research Design

2.1. Sample Selection

Qingting Coffee is a small chain catering business in Nanping City, Fujian Province, China, with registered and operating entities in Jianyang District and Yanping District. As a typical labor-intensive service business in a smaller city, it faces the common "high mobility, low barriers" employment problem. The data analyzed in this article were collected by the company through questionnaires administered to its employees.

The survey covered 26 employees of the Jianyang store (Store J) and the Yanping store (Store Y) on January 1, 2026: 14 employees at Store J and 12 at Store Y. Women accounted for 53.8% of the sample, employees under 25 accounted for more than 60%, and employees with less than one year of service accounted for 34.6%. This quasi-experimental study reports the between-store comparison component of a broader action research project conducted at Qingting Coffee; the qualitative diagnostic findings and the within-store intervention cycles of that project, together with operational indicators (productivity measured by cups produced, store sales, and customer waiting time), are documented separately. All 26 employees provided complete responses at all three waves; the five control-store employees and one experimental-store employee who resigned during the period completed the later waves as exit surveys. Follow-up surveys were administered three and six months after baseline. Action research has been applied in related organizational settings in China to address employee turnover and business

performance problems [36, 37]. The questionnaire data reported in this article were collected by the company as part of its routine human resource management and were analyzed with the company's authorization; employees participated voluntarily and anonymously.

2.2. Research Methods

To enhance employee retention, Qingting Coffee introduced two intervention measures, the "Self-Scheduling Model" and "Rotational Shift Selection", aiming to mitigate the "high mobility, low barriers" employment dilemma through the autonomous compensation mechanism in labor process theory.

Store J and Store Y served as the control group and the experimental group, respectively.

Store J, the control group, kept the traditional work arrangement system. Working hours were fixed, and clock-in, leave application, and overtime followed strict procedures. The duties and operating procedures of each position were fixed, and employees completed assigned tasks step by step. Clear reward and punishment rules and unified behavioral norms ensured that employees' behavior met enterprise standards.

Store Y, the experimental group, adopted the combined "Self-Scheduling Model + Rotational Shift Selection" arrangement. Each month, employees submitted a preference calendar marking periods when they were unavailable and periods they preferred. Employees then selected shifts in order of rotation priority until all shifts were filled. To prevent senior employees from monopolizing desirable shifts, a cumulative point system determined the order of shift selection, so that long-term opportunities were equal.

2.3. Questionnaire Design

Employee retention refers to an organization's ability to keep its employees through effective management practices, so that employees remain satisfied with their organizational identity and continue to work for the organization. Retention is shaped by both organizational and personal factors.

Table 1. Questionnaire on Employee Retention

Item	Problem
Q1	My values are very similar to those of the company.
Q2	The company has made genuine efforts for the development of its employees.
Q3	I'm very glad to work in such a company.
Q4	I am willing to mobilize my friends around me to join our company.
Q5	The most important thing for me is to devote myself to my current job.
Q6	I am extremely devoted to my work.
Q7	Most of the things I care about are related to my job.
Q8	I am closely linked to my current job, and this situation is hard to change.
Q9	Most of my life goals are work-oriented.
Q10	I think work is a very important focus of my life.
Q11	I can usually focus on my work.
Q12	I will consider finding a job with a more suitable working mode.
Q13	I am actively seeking a new job.
Q14	If I can find a better job, I will consider leaving my current company.
Q15	If I can find a job with a better salary, I will consider quitting my current job.

This article takes employee retention as the outcome variable. The questionnaire was adapted by the company's human resources department from the employee retention scale developed by Mak and Sockel [38], as shown in Table 1, and was administered by the company before and during the intervention. The original scale contains 18 items measuring three dimensions: job burnout (10 items), loyalty (4 items), and turnover intention (4 items), and it was validated among information systems employees. Three adaptations were made for this study. First, following Schaufeli et al. [39], who conceptualize burnout and engagement as opposite poles of the same continuum, the burnout dimension was reframed as work engagement, and three items were removed to reduce respondent burden among frontline service staff. Second, the four loyalty items describe the employee's attachment to the organization and willingness to remain, which corresponds to the affective component of organizational commitment; the dimension was therefore labeled organizational commitment. The full item-by-item mapping between the original and adapted scales is available from the authors on request. Third, item wording was adapted to the catering industry context; for example, the original turnover intention item "I will consider looking for a company with a better management system" was reworded as "I will consider finding a job that suits my work style better", so that the items can distinguish the traditional work arrangement model from the flexible

one. The adapted questionnaire contains 15 items: 4 for organizational commitment, 7 for work engagement, and 4 for turnover intention.

A five-point Likert scale was used for all items ("Strongly Disagree" = 1, "Disagree" = 2, "Neutral" = 3, "Agree" = 4, "Strongly Agree" = 5). Because retention is a sensitive topic and respondents might feel management pressure, the questionnaire was administered anonymously to encourage honest responding. The four turnover intention items (Q12-Q15) are negatively worded relative to retention and were reverse-scored (1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2, 5 = 1) before dimension and total scores were computed, so that higher total scores always indicate stronger retention. The item means reported in Table 5 are raw scores prior to this reversal. Anonymous administration and the inclusion of negatively worded items also serve as procedural remedies against common method bias.

3. Data Analysis

3.1. Validity and Reliability Analysis

3.1.1. Reliability Analysis

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient is commonly used to assess the reliability of attitude scales: values above 0.8 indicate good reliability, values between 0.7 and 0.8 indicate acceptable reliability, and values between 0.6 and 0.7 indicate marginal reliability. The results are shown in Table 2. All Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the employee retention intention scale exceed 0.7, indicating acceptable reliability.

Table 2. Reliability of the Employee Retention Questionnaire

Variable	Item	Cronbach α
Organizational commitment	4	0.831
Work engagement	7	0.801
Turnover intention	4	0.802
Employee retention intention	15	0.723

3.1.2. Validity Analysis

Validity analysis examines whether the questionnaire items reflect the constructs they are intended to measure. Because the questionnaire was adapted from an established scale, its content validity is supported by the source instrument; this section therefore focuses on structural validity.

Structural validity was assessed with the KMO measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. A KMO value closer to 1 indicates stronger common factors among variables; values between 0.5 and 0.6 are considered mediocre but still tolerable for exploratory analysis. As shown in Table 3, the KMO value of the employee retention scale is 0.558, and Bartlett's test is significant (approximate $\chi^2 = 180.68$, $df = 105$, $p < .001$), indicating that the items share common factors; given the exploratory purpose and the small sample, the factor analysis was conducted with caution [40].

Table 3. KMO Sample Measurement and Bartlett's Sphere Test Results

KMO value		0.558
Bartlett sphere test	Approx. Chi-Square	180.68
	Degree of freedom	105
	Significance level	< .001

An exploratory factor analysis (principal component extraction) with varimax orthogonal rotation was then conducted; Table 4 reports the results. All item loadings exceed 0.5, and the rotated structure is consistent with the intended three-factor design. Organizational commitment, work engagement, and turnover intention explain 19.585%, 22.288%, and 17.981% of the variance in employee retention, respectively, jointly accounting for 59.854%. These data indicate acceptable structural validity. Because the sample is small ($N = 26$), this factor analysis is exploratory; simulation studies show that exploratory factor analysis with small samples can still recover the major factors when communalities are high and the factor structure is simple [40]. The three-factor solution is therefore interpreted as descriptive support for the adapted scale rather than confirmatory validation.

Table 4. Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis

Project	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Organizational commitment 4	0.768		
Organizational commitment 1	0.861		
Organizational commitment 2	0.844		
Organizational commitment 3	0.786		
Work engagement 2		0.808	
Work engagement 6		0.684	
Work engagement 7		0.627	
Work engagement 1		0.659	
Work engagement 3		0.691	
Work engagement 5		0.651	
Work engagement 4		0.617	
Turnover intention 1			0.720
Turnover intention 2			0.789
Turnover intention 4			0.836
Turnover intention 3			0.781
Variance interpretation rate	19.585	22.288	17.981
Cumulative variance interpretation rate	19.585	41.873	59.854

3.2. Experimental Results

After implementing the two flexible work arrangement interventions, namely "Self-Scheduling Model" and "Rotational Shift Selection", the survey results of employee retention are shown in Tables 5 and 6. The two groups were nearly equal at baseline (control 42.71 vs. experimental 41.67; $t(24) = 0.50$, $p = .620$). After 6 months of intervention, the retention intention score of the experimental group was 50.67, higher than the control group's 44.07 ($t(24) = -2.68$, $p = .013$, Cohen's $d = -1.06$, 95% CI [-11.67, -1.52]). The observed six-month retention rate was 64.29% (9/14) in the control group and 91.67% (11/12) in the experimental group, a risk difference of 27.4 percentage points (Newcombe 95% CI, -5.9 to 53.8). The difference is in the expected direction, but it did not reach statistical significance given the small sample (Fisher's exact test, two-sided $p = .170$).

Table 5. Raw Score Means of Retention Items by Group and Wave

Item	Baseline		After 3 months		After 6 months	
	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental
Q1	2.14	2.17	2.00	2.25	2.14	2.83
Q2	2.79	2.50	3.00	2.83	3.29	3.83
Q3	2.36	2.83	2.29	3.50	2.71	4.00
Q4	3.43	2.75	3.71	2.75	3.79	4.08
Q5	2.57	2.17	2.86	3.08	3.07	4.33
Q6	4.21	4.08	4.14	4.58	3.86	4.75
Q7	2.93	2.50	3.00	3.33	3.29	3.08
Q8	3.57	3.42	3.43	3.67	3.71	3.67
Q9	2.29	2.92	2.43	3.00	2.36	3.92
Q10	4.07	3.58	4.07	4.08	4.14	4.33
Q11	2.07	2.50	1.93	2.67	2.07	3.00
Q12	3.71	3.17	3.79	3.58	3.86	3.17
Q13	3.71	4.17	3.71	4.50	3.79	4.67
Q14	3.57	3.33	3.64	4.25	3.86	4.00
Q15	2.71	3.08	2.79	4.17	2.86	3.33

Table 6. Comparison of Employee Retention between the Two Groups

Group	N	Retention intention score			Retention rate
		Baseline	After 3 months	After 6 months	
Control group	14	42.71	42.93	44.07	64.29% (9/14)
Experimental group	12	41.67	43.25	50.67	91.67% (11/12)
t / χ^2	-	0.50	-0.13	-2.68*	Fisher's exact
p	-	.620	.900	.013*	.170 (n.s.)

Note: Retention intention scores range from 15 to 75; the four turnover intention items (Q12-Q15) were reverse-scored before totals were computed. The retention rate was tested with Fisher's exact test (two-sided). a Independent-samples t tests on reverse-scored totals (control minus experimental); negative t values indicate higher scores in the experimental group. *** indicates significance at 0.001; ** indicates significance at 0.01; * indicates significance at 0.05.

The above results indicate that H1 is supported: after six months of the combined "Self-Scheduling

Model" and "Rotational Shift Selection" intervention, the retention intention score of the experimental group (50.67) was significantly higher than that of the control group (44.07), while the two groups were nearly equal at baseline (42.71 vs. 41.67) and after three months (42.93 vs. 43.25; $t(24) = -0.13$, $p = .900$). H2 receives directional support only: the observed retention rate of the experimental group (91.67%) was higher than that of the control group (64.29%), but with 26 employees this difference did not reach statistical significance (Fisher's exact test, $p = .170$). The flexible work arrangement model therefore appears to raise retention intention first, and its effect on actual retention behavior requires confirmation with a larger sample and a longer observation window.

4. Discussion

Most existing literature discusses employee turnover rather than retention, and retention is often measured simply as the opposite of turnover intention. The two are related but not equivalent. Retention also involves positive work attitudes and behaviors, such as identification with the organization, organizational citizenship behavior, and work engagement. Measuring retention only as the reverse of turnover intention is therefore incomplete.

Mak and Sockel [38] measure employee retention through three dimensions: turnover intention, job burnout, and organizational commitment. Their rationale is that burnout and low commitment share many antecedents with turnover: employees who are burned out or lack organizational loyalty may stay temporarily, but they contribute little and eventually leave. Because maintaining an effective, healthy, and loyal workforce is a necessary condition for competitive advantage, they integrated existing scales of turnover intention, organizational commitment, and job burnout into a single employee retention scale.

Flexible working arrangements refer to a working system that meets the organization's needs for different types of human resources through flexible adjustments of working hours, locations, content, and staffing [41]. As a personalized human resource management practice, such arrangements allow employees to schedule their work and leisure time autonomously, ease work-family conflict, and improve job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which benefits both the enterprise and the employees.

Compared with traditional work design, personalized work design takes into account the needs of both the organization and the employees while remaining grounded in job responsibilities and job analysis, and it allows employees to exercise initiative in the design process [42]. Personalized work design emphasizes employee participation and need satisfaction, which helps employees understand the meaning of their work and recognize their job responsibilities. It also grants employees the autonomy to set medium- and short-term work goals, which strengthens their sense of responsibility and motivation [43].

The logic of the combined intervention at Qingting Coffee can be read through the autonomous compensation mechanism in labor process theory: through negotiation, employees and the employer reach personalized work arrangements that serve both sides. Such personalized arrangements improve employees' work autonomy and perceived distributive fairness, and they also affect work-family conflict, organizational citizenship behavior, turnover intention, work motivation, and work performance [44].

Our results are consistent with the finding that flexible work arrangements are associated with lower turnover intention [16, 20, 21], and they add two observations. First, the between-group difference in retention intention was still present at six months, whereas Caillier [35] reported that the retention effect of flexible schedules in US federal agencies was not significant overall. One possible explanation is that our intervention gave frontline service employees direct choice over specific shifts, rather than only the option to work remotely, which matters for jobs that cannot be performed from home. Second, the mechanism fits both self-determination theory and the autonomous compensation logic in labor process theory. Self-determination theory holds that autonomy is a basic psychological need, and that satisfying it supports employees' motivation, well-being, and retention [45]: the Self-Scheduling Model directly grants scheduling autonomy, while Rotational Shift Selection equalizes access to desirable and undesirable shifts, which supports perceived fairness. This reading is consistent with Haines III et al. [20], who found that flexible work is associated with higher work control, and with Tsen [32], who argued that the effects of flexible work arrangements depend on how they are implemented.

For small chain service enterprises in smaller cities, the practical implication is direct: retention can be improved without raising wages by redesigning how shifts are allocated. A workable sequence is to publish shift templates in advance, let employees self-schedule within staffing constraints, and rotate the remaining unpopular shifts so that no employee is permanently assigned to them [46]. Managers should monitor fairness perceptions during implementation, because the benefit of the intervention depends on employees perceiving the allocation as transparent. Employee participation in scheduling can also strengthen employees' sense of ownership and identification with the enterprise, which supports job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Given the small scale of such enterprises, these measures require little capital investment and can be adjusted store by store.

5. Conclusion

This article defines employee retention through three dimensions: organizational commitment, work engagement, and turnover intention. Using a quasi-experimental comparison of two stores of Qingting Coffee in Nanping City, it examined the between-store differences in employees' retention intention and observed retention rate following the "Self-Scheduling Model + Rotational Shift Selection" intervention. Under the traditional work arrangement, the control store's retention intention score was 44.07 and its retention rate was 64.29% after six months. The store that implemented the combined intervention reached a retention intention score of 50.67 and a retention rate of 91.67% over the same period. The difference in retention intention was clear and increased over time, while the difference in retention rate was in the expected direction but not statistically significant at this sample size. In terms of the hypotheses, H1 was supported, whereas H2 received directional support but was not statistically confirmed. Overall, designing scheduling autonomy and fair shift rotation into work arrangements is associated with higher retention intention among frontline service employees; whether it also raises observed retention requires confirmation in larger samples.

This study has several limitations. First, the design is a quasi-experiment without randomization, and the intervention is confounded with the store because each store received only one condition; store-level factors such as location, customer flow, and management style may account for part of the observed difference. Second, the sample is small ($N = 26$), which limits statistical power; the non-significant result for the retention rate should be read as inconclusive rather than as evidence of no effect. Third, the three waves were analyzed with separate between-group comparisons rather than a group-by-time model; with a larger sample, a mixed analysis of variance or a linear mixed model would provide a more direct test of the intervention effect. Fourth, the factor analysis of the adapted scale is exploratory and was conducted on the same small sample, so the scale structure needs confirmation in a larger sample. Fifth, all questionnaire measures were self-reported and collected from the same source at each wave; anonymity and negatively worded items were used as procedural remedies, but common method bias cannot be ruled out. Sixth, because turnover is a sensitive topic, social desirability bias may still have affected responses. Seventh, the adapted items were reworded for the catering context and have not been validated independently. Eighth, no formal manipulation check (such as perceived schedule control) was administered, so the strength of the intervention as experienced by employees cannot be verified from the survey data. Future research should replicate the intervention across more stores and regions, add objective indicators such as attendance and sales records, and test whether the effect on observed retention becomes significant with a larger sample and a longer follow-up.

Declarations

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Data Availability: The de-identified item-level data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to the company's authorization.

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