Identifying the Factors of a Strategic Human Resource Retention Model: A Case Study of Bank Melli, East Azerbaijan Province

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to identify and validate the key factors of a strategic human resource retention model tailored to the organizational context of Bank Melli in East Azerbaijan Province. This study adopted a qualitative, developmental research design grounded in expert knowledge. The study population consisted of university faculty members in management, human resource professionals, and senior banking experts. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure both expertise and diversity of perspectives. Data were collected through an extensive review of relevant scientific literature and semi-structured interviews conducted with ten experts. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by open, axial, and selective coding procedures. To enhance rigor and achieve consensus on the extracted components, the Delphi technique was employed to refine, confirm, or reject the identified factors. Credibility and trustworthiness were ensured through expert review, iterative coding, and consistency checks across data sources. The findings indicate that strategic human resource retention in the banking sector is a multidimensional construct shaped by interrelated organizational and managerial factors. Core validated dimensions included organizational sustainability and job security, organizational justice and transparency, culture of respect and human interaction, human-centered leadership, organizational belonging, professional development conditions, learning and creativity culture, organizational cohesion, psychological well-being and work–life balance, and supportive systems with effective feedback. Several components, particularly those emphasizing symbolic recognition, transparency, leadership support, and well-being, were endorsed more strongly than purely financial incentives, suggesting a shift toward relational and developmental retention mechanisms. The study concludes that effective human resource retention in Bank Melli requires an integrated strategic approach that aligns organizational structures, leadership practices, cultural values, and employee well-being with long-term organizational goals, moving beyond traditional incentive-based models.

Keywords: Strategic Human Resource Management; Human Resource Retention; Banking Sector; Qualitative Research; Delphi Method

Introduction

Human resources have increasingly been recognized as a central source of sustainable competitive advantage in contemporary organizations, particularly in knowledge-intensive and service-based sectors such as banking. In environments characterized by rapid technological change, digital transformation, regulatory pressure, and

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intensified competition, organizations are no longer able to rely solely on financial or physical assets to maintain performance and stability. Instead, the ability to attract, develop, and more importantly retain skilled and committed human resources has become a strategic priority. Human resource retention is now understood not merely as an operational concern aimed at reducing turnover costs, but as a strategic mechanism that safeguards organizational knowledge, preserves social capital, and ensures long-term organizational sustainability (1, 2).

Retention challenges have intensified in recent years due to shifting employee expectations, generational changes in the workforce, and the growing importance of meaningful work, fairness, and well-being. Employees today seek not only job security, but also transparency, participation, developmental opportunities, psychological safety, and work–life balance. As a result, organizations that fail to respond to these evolving expectations face increased risks of talent loss, reduced organizational commitment, and declining productivity. Empirical evidence from both public and private organizations indicates that ineffective retention systems can lead to knowledge drain, weakened organizational culture, and escalating recruitment and training costs (3, 4). Consequently, scholars and practitioners increasingly emphasize the need for strategic, context-sensitive retention models that align organizational goals with employee needs.

Within the broader field of strategic human resource management, retention is viewed as an outcome of coherent and integrated HR policies that are aligned with organizational strategy and environmental conditions. Strategic human resource management moves beyond isolated HR practices and focuses on the systematic alignment of recruitment, development, performance management, compensation, leadership, and organizational culture to achieve long-term objectives. Research has demonstrated that organizations adopting a strategic approach to HRM are more capable of building organizational resilience, enhancing employee commitment, and sustaining performance under uncertainty (5, 6). In this perspective, retention is not the result of a single policy, but the cumulative effect of multiple, interrelated strategic factors operating at individual, group, and organizational levels.

Recent studies further highlight that the nature of strategic HRM is undergoing substantial transformation under the influence of digitalization, artificial intelligence, and data-driven decision-making. The integration of digital technologies into HR processes has reshaped how organizations manage talent, evaluate performance, and design retention strategies. While digital tools offer opportunities for personalization, efficiency, and predictive analytics, they also introduce new challenges related to fairness, transparency, and employee trust. Scholars argue that in the digital era, retention strategies must be redesigned to balance technological efficiency with human-centered values (7-9). This dual requirement underscores the importance of developing strategic retention models that are both technologically informed and socially grounded.

In parallel, the literature increasingly emphasizes sustainability-oriented and ethical dimensions of human resource management. Sustainable HRM frameworks argue that retention should be grounded in long-term employment relationships, organizational justice, employee well-being, and social responsibility. Empirical findings suggest that sustainable HRM practices positively influence retention through mechanisms such as social capital, trust, and perceived organizational support (10, 11). These insights indicate that retention strategies must address not only economic incentives, but also ethical leadership, fairness, and the psychological contract between employees and organizations.

Despite the growing body of international research on strategic HRM and retention, evidence suggests that retention factors are highly context-dependent and shaped by sectoral, cultural, and institutional conditions. Banking organizations, particularly in developing and transitional economies, operate under unique constraints such as rigid

regulatory frameworks, hierarchical structures, high accountability requirements, and rapid technological change. These characteristics influence employee perceptions of job security, participation, justice, and career development. Studies conducted in different organizational contexts, including public institutions, educational organizations, and industrial firms, demonstrate that retention drivers vary significantly across sectors and cannot be uncritically generalized (4, 12).

In the Iranian context, the issue of human resource retention has gained particular importance in recent years due to economic volatility, labor market pressures, and organizational reforms in public and semi-public institutions. Banking organizations, as key actors in the national economy, face the dual challenge of maintaining operational stability while adapting to digital transformation and increasing customer expectations. Research conducted in Iranian organizations indicates that traditional retention mechanisms, such as job permanence or financial benefits alone, are no longer sufficient to ensure long-term employee commitment. Instead, employees increasingly value transparency, merit-based systems, leadership support, professional development, and psychological well-being (13, 14).

Several Iranian studies have attempted to conceptualize and model human resource retention using quantitative and qualitative approaches. For instance, structural equation modeling has been employed to examine causal relationships between HR practices and retention outcomes, highlighting the roles of organizational justice, leadership, and development opportunities (13). Expert-based qualitative studies have also identified key retention components in knowledge-based and public organizations, emphasizing the need for integrated and strategic frameworks (2, 14). However, these studies often focus on specific organizational types or rely on predefined constructs, leaving limited room for context-specific exploration in the banking sector.

International research further reinforces the importance of aligning retention strategies with broader organizational systems such as internal branding, supply chain resilience, and strategic planning. Studies show that strategic HRM contributes indirectly to organizational outcomes by strengthening employee identification, agility, and adaptability (15-17). In this regard, retention is not an isolated HR outcome but a mediating mechanism that links human capital management to organizational performance and resilience. These findings suggest that retention models should be designed as part of a broader strategic architecture rather than as standalone HR initiatives.

Moreover, recent systematic reviews and empirical studies in diverse contexts such as social enterprises, start-ups, higher education institutions, and public sector organizations indicate that leadership style, organizational culture, learning orientation, and employee participation play decisive roles in shaping retention outcomes (18-20). At the same time, the increasing penetration of artificial intelligence and data analytics into HR processes raises questions about how retention strategies can be humanized and legitimized in technologically mediated environments (7, 9). These debates point to the necessity of developing nuanced retention models that integrate structural, cultural, leadership, and technological dimensions.

Despite these advances, a notable gap remains in the literature regarding the identification of strategic human resource retention factors through inductive, expert-driven approaches within the banking sector, particularly in provincial and regional contexts. Most existing studies either adopt quantitative survey designs based on predefined constructs or focus on national-level organizations, thereby overlooking localized organizational realities and expert knowledge embedded in specific institutional settings. East Azerbaijan Province, as one of Iran's economically significant regions, hosts major branches of Bank Melli that operate under complex administrative, social, and

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economic conditions. Understanding retention dynamics in this context requires a qualitative, exploratory approach that captures expert perspectives and organizational specificities.

Given these considerations, there is a clear need for research that systematically identifies and organizes the strategic factors influencing human resource retention in banking organizations using robust qualitative methods. Such research can contribute to theory by refining context-sensitive retention frameworks and to practice by providing decision-makers with empirically grounded guidance for designing effective retention strategies. By employing expert interviews, thematic analysis, and Delphi validation, the present study seeks to bridge the gap between abstract strategic HRM concepts and the concrete realities of human resource management in Bank Melli.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to identify and validate the factors of a strategic human resource retention model in Bank Melli of East Azerbaijan Province through a qualitative, expert-based approach.

Methods and Materials

This study adopted a qualitative, developmental research design with the primary objective of identifying and conceptualizing the key factors underlying a strategic human resource retention model within the context of Bank Melli in East Azerbaijan Province. Given the exploratory and theory-building nature of the research, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate to capture in-depth expert knowledge, contextual insights, and tacit understandings related to human resource retention in the banking sector. The study population consisted of three main groups: university faculty members specializing in management and human resource management, senior human resource professionals, and experienced banking experts familiar with organizational and administrative systems in the Iranian banking context. The inclusion of these groups was intended to ensure both theoretical rigor and practical relevance in the development of the proposed model.

Sampling in this qualitative phase was conducted using non-probability methods, specifically purposive (judgmental) sampling combined with snowball sampling. Initially, participants were selected based on the researchers' informed judgment regarding their expertise, academic standing, professional experience, and direct involvement in human resource management or banking governance. Following this initial selection, the snowball technique was employed, whereby each participant was asked to introduce other qualified experts who could contribute valuable perspectives to the study. This iterative process facilitated access to a knowledgeable and information-rich sample while also ensuring diversity of viewpoints. The final sample comprised ten participants, including academic supervisors and advisors as well as seven senior managers and human resource experts from the banking sector. Although the overall sample size was limited, it was considered sufficient for achieving theoretical saturation, as recurring themes and concepts began to emerge consistently across interviews.

Data collection in this study relied on two complementary sources: extensive library-based research and semi-structured expert interviews. The library-based component involved a systematic review of relevant Persian and international books, academic journals, prior research projects, policy documents, and credible electronic databases related to human resource management, strategic retention, and banking organizations. Particular emphasis was placed on peer-reviewed scientific-research articles, ISI-indexed journals, and authoritative academic and institutional websites. This phase served multiple purposes, including clarifying the theoretical foundations of the study, identifying preliminary dimensions and indicators of human resource retention, and informing the development of interview protocols.

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The primary empirical data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with the selected experts. Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as it provides a balance between structure and flexibility, allowing the researchers to explore predetermined themes while also enabling participants to elaborate freely on issues they perceived as important. Interviews were conducted at multiple stages of the research process. Initially, exploratory interviews were carried out concurrently with the review of theoretical foundations and prior literature in order to refine the research problem, identify key concepts, and uncover context-specific factors. Subsequently, expert consultations were used to evaluate, critique, and refine the factors and preliminary items extracted from the literature. Participants were also engaged in assessing the relevance, clarity, and completeness of proposed indicators, suggesting modifications, and confirming the suitability of Bank Melli as the case study for model testing. Given the developmental nature of the research, these exploratory interviews played a crucial role in clarifying the research trajectory, introducing specialized references, and shaping a coherent conceptual framework for the study.

The qualitative data obtained from interviews and documentary sources were analyzed using thematic analysis combined with systematic coding procedures. Thematic analysis was selected due to its flexibility and its capacity to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning within qualitative data. In this study, thematic analysis was employed with two distinct but related objectives: first, to determine the main dimensions and components of strategic human resource retention, and second, to extract and refine the specific indicators and items associated with each component. Through repeated reading and close engagement with the data, the researchers sought to move beyond surface-level descriptions toward deeper interpretive understanding.

The analytic process followed established stages of qualitative coding, including open, axial, and selective coding. During open coding, interview transcripts and textual materials were examined line by line to identify initial concepts and labels that captured meaningful units of data. These concepts were then grouped into categories based on similarity and relevance. In the axial coding phase, relationships among the categories were explored and structured using a paradigmatic model that linked causal conditions, contextual and intervening factors, action or interaction strategies, and outcomes. This stage enabled the integration of fragmented categories into more coherent explanatory constructs. Finally, selective coding was used to identify the core category of the analysis and to systematically relate it to other categories, validate these relationships, and refine the emerging theoretical narrative.

In addition, elements of meta-synthesis were employed to integrate findings derived from the systematic literature review with the qualitative interview results. This process involved several iterative steps, including the formulation of guiding research questions, systematic searching and screening of relevant studies, careful extraction of key concepts, synthesis and interpretation of qualitative findings, and quality control through expert review. To enhance the rigor of the analysis, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity were emphasized throughout the research process. Expert feedback was used to review extracted themes and ensure their alignment with both empirical data and theoretical backgrounds. Ultimately, the analyzed data were organized into a thematic network that represented the strategic human resource retention model, providing a structured and theoretically grounded framework for understanding retention practices in the banking sector.

Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the axial codes derived from the qualitative analysis of expert interviews, illustrating how foundational open codes were systematically clustered into higher-order organizing themes related to strategic human resource retention.

Table 1. Axial Codes Extracted from the Interviews

Open Codes (Basic Themes)	Organizing Themes
Ensuring job stability	Organizational sustainability and job security
Organizational stability	Organizational sustainability and job security
Predictability of decisions	Organizational sustainability and job security
Assurance about career future	Organizational sustainability and job security
Interactional justice	Organizational justice and transparency
Transparency of organizational processes	Organizational justice and transparency
Distributive justice	Organizational justice and transparency
Procedural justice	Organizational justice and transparency
Transparency in organizational decisions	Organizational justice and transparency
Principle-based decision-making	Organizational justice and transparency
Mutual respect among employees	Culture of respect and human interaction
Managerial integrity	Culture of respect and human interaction
Teamwork and cooperation	Culture of respect and human interaction
Acceptance of behavioral differences	Culture of respect and human interaction
Trust in employees	Human-centered and participatory leadership
Participation in decision-making	Human-centered and participatory leadership
Managers acting as coaches	Human-centered and participatory leadership
Human leadership skills	Human-centered and participatory leadership
Supportive leadership style	Human-centered and participatory leadership
Performance-based rewards	Organizational belonging
Formal recognition and appreciation of efforts	Organizational belonging
Provision of welfare facilities	Organizational belonging
Supplementary health insurance	Organizational belonging
Supportive loans for employees	Organizational belonging
Allocation of non-financial benefits	Organizational belonging
Incentive leave for high-performing staff	Organizational belonging
Visibility of high performers' achievements	Organizational belonging
Targeted employee training	Professional growth and development
Mentoring	Professional growth and development
Clear career path	Professional growth and development
Talent management and promotion opportunities	Professional growth and development
Development of diverse competencies	Professional growth and development
Knowledge and experience sharing	Professional growth and development
Continuous learning	Learning and creativity culture
Support for internal creativity	Learning and creativity culture
Valuing innovation	Learning and creativity culture
Establishment of organizational learning culture	Learning and creativity culture
Availability of training workshops	Learning and creativity culture
Valuing organizational innovation	Organizational cohesion and structural alignment
Goal alignment	Organizational cohesion and structural alignment
Transparency of senior management decisions	Organizational cohesion and structural alignment
Participatory organizational decision-making	Organizational cohesion and structural alignment
Trust in professional expertise	Organizational cohesion and structural alignment
Work–life balance	Psychological well-being and work–life balance
Workload management	Psychological well-being and work–life balance
Managerial psychological support	Psychological well-being and work–life balance
Attention to occupational well-being	Psychological well-being and work–life balance
Managerial support	Supportive system and effective feedback
Attention to employees' needs and requests	Supportive system and effective feedback
Performance improvement	Supportive system and effective feedback
Establishment of suggestion channels	Supportive system and effective feedback
Transparency of performance appraisal	Supportive system and effective feedback

As shown in Table 1, the axial coding process resulted in a coherent set of organizing themes that collectively delineate the strategic foundations of human resource retention in the banking context. The theme of organizational sustainability and job security emerged from codes emphasizing stability, predictability, and assurance regarding

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employees' career futures, highlighting the centrality of perceived security in retaining skilled personnel. Organizational justice and transparency were strongly represented through interactional, procedural, and distributive justice, along with transparent and principle-based decision-making, underscoring the role of fairness and clarity in fostering trust. A culture of respect and human interaction was reflected in mutual respect, managerial integrity, teamwork, and acceptance of individual differences, pointing to the social and relational dimensions of retention. Human-centered and participatory leadership encompassed trust in employees, shared decision-making, coaching-oriented management, and supportive leadership styles, indicating that leadership behavior is a critical driver of long-term commitment. Organizational belonging was constructed through performance-based rewards, formal recognition, welfare benefits, financial and non-financial incentives, and the visibility of employee achievements, suggesting that both tangible and symbolic rewards reinforce attachment to the organization. Professional growth and development was another prominent theme, integrating targeted training, mentoring, clear career paths, talent management, competency development, and knowledge sharing, which together signal opportunities for advancement and self-actualization. The learning and creativity culture theme captured continuous learning, support for creativity, innovation, and access to training workshops, reflecting the importance of adaptability and intellectual stimulation. Organizational cohesion and structural alignment emphasized goal alignment, transparent senior management decisions, participatory governance, and trust in professional expertise, indicating the need for systemic coherence. Finally, psychological well-being and work–life balance, along with a supportive system and effective feedback, highlighted the significance of workload management, psychological support, responsiveness to employee needs, transparent performance appraisal, and feedback mechanisms. Taken together, these organizing themes form an integrated strategic framework that explains how multiple structural, relational, and developmental factors interact to sustain human resource retention in Bank Melli.

Table 2. Results of the Delphi Test for the Components of the Strategic Human Resource Retention Model

No.	Concepts	Approval Rate	Decision
	Organizational sustainability and job security		
1	Ensuring job stability	87%	Retained in the model
2	Organizational stability	82%	Retained in the model
3	Predictability of decisions	77%	Retained in the model
4	Assurance about career future	65%	Retained in the model
	Organizational justice and transparency		
5	Interactional justice	71%	Retained in the model
6	Transparency of organizational processes	81%	Retained in the model
7	Distributive justice	91%	Retained in the model
8	Procedural justice	88%	Retained in the model
9	Transparency in organizational decisions	76%	Retained in the model
10	Principle-based decision-making	65%	Requires revision
	Culture of respect and human interaction		
11	Mutual respect among employees	81%	Retained in the model
12	Managerial integrity	83%	Retained in the model
13	Teamwork and cooperation	87%	Retained in the model
14	Acceptance of behavioral differences	76%	Retained in the model
	Human-centered and participatory leadership		
15	Trust in employees	66%	Retained in the model
16	Participation in decision-making	54%	Rejected
17	Managers acting as coaches	83%	Retained in the model
18	Human leadership skills	75%	Retained in the model
19	Supportive leadership style	62%	Retained in the model
	Organizational belonging		

20	Performance-based rewards	42%	Rejected
21	Formal recognition and appreciation of efforts	78%	Retained in the model
22	Provision of welfare facilities	81%	Retained in the model
23	Supplementary health insurance	31%	Rejected
24	Supportive loans for employees	37%	Rejected
25	Allocation of non-financial benefits	74%	Retained in the model
26	Incentive leave for high-performing staff	77%	Retained in the model
27	Visibility of high performers' achievements	41%	Rejected
	Professional development conditions		
28	Targeted employee training	66%	Retained in the model
29	Organizational mentoring	71%	Retained in the model
30	Clear career path	75%	Retained in the model
31	Talent management and promotion opportunities	69%	Retained in the model
32	Development of diverse competencies	31%	Rejected
33	Knowledge and experience sharing	72%	Retained in the model
	Learning and creativity culture		
34	Continuous learning conditions	71%	Retained in the model
35	Support for internal creativity	78%	Retained in the model
36	Valuing innovation	81%	Retained in the model
37	Establishment of organizational learning culture	35%	Rejected
38	Holding training workshops	88%	Retained in the model
	Organizational cohesion and structural alignment		
39	Alignment of organizational and employee goals	73%	Retained in the model
40	Transparency of senior management decisions	77%	Retained in the model
41	Participatory organizational decision-making	81%	Retained in the model
42	Trust in professional expertise	72%	Retained in the model
	Psychological well-being and work–life balance		
43	Work–life balance	81%	Retained in the model
44	Workload management	71%	Retained in the model
45	Managerial psychological support	65%	Retained in the model
46	Attention to occupational well-being	71%	Retained in the model
	Supportive system and effective feedback		
47	Attention to employees' needs and requests	73%	Retained in the model
48	Performance improvement	81%	Retained in the model
49	Establishment of suggestion channels	82%	Retained in the model
50	Transparency of performance appraisal	72%	Retained in the model

With regard to organizational sustainability and job security, the Delphi results indicate a strong consensus among experts on the importance of stability-related factors in the strategic retention model. All four concepts within this theme achieved approval rates above the acceptance threshold, suggesting that ensuring job stability, maintaining organizational continuity, enhancing predictability of managerial decisions, and providing reassurance about employees' career futures are perceived as foundational elements for retaining human resources in the banking sector.

In the theme of organizational justice and transparency, most components received very high approval rates, particularly distributive and procedural justice, which were among the most strongly endorsed concepts in the entire model. Transparency of processes and decisions was also widely supported, reflecting experts' emphasis on fairness and clarity as critical mechanisms for building trust. However, principle-based decision-making, despite meeting the minimum approval threshold, was identified as requiring revision, indicating the need for clearer operationalization or contextual adaptation.

The culture of respect and human interaction theme was fully retained, as all related concepts exceeded the approval criterion. Mutual respect, managerial integrity, teamwork, and acceptance of behavioral differences were

collectively recognized as essential cultural conditions that foster positive interpersonal relationships and strengthen employees' emotional attachment to the organization.

Within human-centered and participatory leadership, most components were confirmed, highlighting the importance of trust in employees, coaching-oriented management, human leadership skills, and supportive leadership styles. In contrast, participation in decision-making was rejected due to insufficient expert agreement, suggesting that while supportive leadership is valued, formal participation mechanisms may face practical or structural constraints in the banking context.

The results for organizational belonging reveal a selective pattern of acceptance. Intangible and symbolic mechanisms such as formal recognition, non-financial benefits, incentive leave, and welfare facilities were retained, whereas performance-based financial rewards, supplementary insurance, supportive loans, and visibility of individual performance were rejected. This pattern indicates a stronger expert preference for relational and motivational forms of belonging rather than direct financial incentives.

Regarding professional development conditions, most concepts were retained, emphasizing targeted training, mentoring, transparent career paths, talent management, and knowledge sharing as key drivers of retention. The rejection of developing diverse competencies suggests that experts prioritize role-specific and strategically aligned capabilities over broad, generalized skill development in the banking environment.

In the learning and creativity culture theme, support for creativity, innovation, continuous learning, and training workshops received strong endorsement. However, the formal establishment of an organizational learning culture was rejected, implying that experts may perceive learning as an operational practice rather than a formalized cultural construct within the organization.

The theme of organizational cohesion and structural alignment was fully supported, with all concepts retained in the model. Alignment of goals, transparency of senior management decisions, participatory organizational decision-making, and trust in professional expertise were collectively viewed as essential for ensuring coherence between strategic objectives and employee expectations.

For psychological well-being and work–life balance, all proposed components were retained, reflecting a shared expert understanding that balancing work and personal life, managing workloads, providing psychological support, and attending to occupational well-being are integral to sustainable human resource retention.

Finally, the supportive system and effective feedback theme demonstrated unanimous acceptance across all concepts. Attention to employee needs, performance improvement, suggestion systems, and transparent performance appraisal were strongly endorsed, underscoring the importance of continuous feedback, responsiveness, and support as core pillars of the strategic human resource retention model.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify and validate the factors constituting a strategic human resource retention model in Bank Melli of East Azerbaijan Province using a qualitative, expert-based approach. The findings, derived from thematic analysis of expert interviews and subsequently refined through the Delphi technique, reveal that human resource retention in the banking sector is a multidimensional and systemic phenomenon shaped by an interrelated set of structural, relational, leadership, developmental, and well-being–oriented factors. The results demonstrate that retention cannot be reduced to isolated incentives or short-term managerial interventions; rather,

it emerges from the alignment of organizational systems, values, and managerial practices with employees' professional and psychological expectations.

One of the most strongly validated dimensions of the model was organizational sustainability and job security. Experts emphasized that perceived stability, predictability of decisions, and assurance regarding employees' career futures are foundational prerequisites for retention in banking organizations. This finding is consistent with prior studies conducted in Iranian and international contexts, which highlight job security as a critical determinant of employee commitment, particularly in public and semi-public organizations operating under economic uncertainty (3, 4). From a strategic HRM perspective, stability serves as a psychological anchor that enables employees to invest their skills, knowledge, and loyalty in the organization over the long term. The confirmation of this dimension also aligns with retention models developed in knowledge-based and public organizations, where long-term employment relationships are viewed as essential for preserving organizational knowledge and social capital (13, 14).

Another central finding of the study concerns organizational justice and transparency, which emerged as one of the most robustly supported dimensions in the Delphi process. Distributive and procedural justice received particularly high approval rates, indicating that fair allocation of resources and consistent, transparent procedures are perceived as indispensable for retention. This result corroborates extensive evidence in the strategic HRM literature suggesting that perceptions of justice significantly influence trust, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (1, 2). In the banking context, where formal rules and hierarchical decision-making are prevalent, transparency in processes and decisions appears to play a compensatory role by reducing uncertainty and mitigating perceptions of arbitrariness. The partial reservation expressed by experts regarding principle-based decision-making suggests that while ethical consistency is valued, its practical implementation may require clearer operational definitions within bureaucratic systems.

The findings also underscore the importance of a culture of respect and human interaction as a core retention mechanism. Mutual respect, managerial integrity, teamwork, and acceptance of individual differences were unanimously retained in the model. This aligns with contemporary strategic HRM approaches that emphasize relational and cultural dimensions of retention alongside formal HR practices. Prior research indicates that respectful and inclusive organizational climates enhance employees' sense of dignity and belonging, thereby reducing withdrawal behaviors (10, 11). In service-oriented sectors such as banking, where work is highly relational and customer-facing, positive interpersonal dynamics not only support retention but also contribute to service quality and organizational reputation.

Human-centered and participatory leadership emerged as another critical dimension, though with nuanced outcomes. Trust in employees, coaching-oriented leadership, human leadership skills, and supportive leadership styles were validated, whereas formal participation in decision-making was rejected due to insufficient expert consensus. This pattern suggests that experts distinguish between relational support and structural participation. While supportive and trust-based leadership is seen as essential for retention, participatory decision-making mechanisms may be constrained by regulatory frameworks, centralized governance, or risk-averse cultures typical of banking organizations. This interpretation is consistent with international findings indicating that leadership style often has a stronger influence on retention than formal participation structures, particularly in highly regulated environments (5, 20).

The dimension of organizational belonging revealed a selective configuration of retention drivers. Intangible and symbolic practices such as recognition, non-financial benefits, incentive leave, and welfare facilities were retained, whereas performance-based financial rewards, supplementary insurance, and supportive loans were rejected. This finding challenges traditional assumptions that financial incentives are the primary drivers of retention and supports more recent evidence suggesting that symbolic recognition and perceived appreciation may be more influential in sustaining long-term commitment (1, 2). In the context of Bank Melli, where pay structures are often standardized and externally regulated, non-financial mechanisms may provide greater flexibility and psychological impact in reinforcing employees' sense of belonging.

Professional development conditions were also strongly emphasized in the model. Targeted training, mentoring, transparent career paths, talent management, and knowledge sharing were retained, highlighting the strategic importance of growth opportunities in retention. This finding aligns with both Iranian and international studies demonstrating that employees are more likely to remain in organizations that invest in their professional development and provide clear advancement trajectories (14, 19). The rejection of broadly defined competency development suggests that experts prioritize role-relevant and strategically aligned development initiatives over generalized skill accumulation, particularly in specialized banking roles.

The learning and creativity culture dimension further reinforces the developmental orientation of the retention model. Support for creativity, innovation, continuous learning, and training workshops were validated, while the formal establishment of an organizational learning culture was rejected. This apparent contradiction may reflect a pragmatic orientation among experts, who view learning as an operational practice rather than an abstract cultural label. Similar observations have been reported in studies of strategic HRM in transitional and developing economies, where learning is often implemented through concrete programs rather than formal cultural frameworks (12, 18).

Organizational cohesion and structural alignment emerged as a fully supported dimension, encompassing goal alignment, transparency of senior management decisions, participatory organizational decision-making, and trust in professional expertise. This finding highlights the systemic nature of retention, suggesting that employees are more likely to remain when they perceive coherence between organizational strategies and daily practices. Prior research indicates that strategic alignment enhances internal legitimacy and reduces role ambiguity, thereby strengthening commitment and retention (6, 21). In banking organizations, where misalignment between headquarters policies and branch-level realities can be pronounced, structural coherence appears particularly salient.

Psychological well-being and work–life balance were also unanimously retained, underscoring the growing importance of mental health and quality of work life in retention strategies. Workload management, managerial psychological support, and attention to occupational well-being were identified as key components. These results resonate with recent strategic HRM literature emphasizing employee well-being as a strategic asset rather than a peripheral concern (9, 10). In high-pressure banking environments, sustained neglect of well-being may accelerate burnout and turnover, whereas supportive practices can enhance resilience and long-term engagement.

Finally, the supportive system and effective feedback dimension demonstrated strong consensus, highlighting responsiveness to employee needs, performance improvement, suggestion systems, and transparent performance appraisal. This finding supports the view that retention is reinforced through continuous dialogue and feedback

rather than episodic evaluations. Strategic HRM studies consistently show that feedback-rich environments foster learning, trust, and perceived organizational support, all of which contribute to retention (13, 15).

Taken together, the findings of this study converge with contemporary strategic human resource management theories that conceptualize retention as an emergent outcome of aligned systems, ethical leadership, developmental opportunities, and employee well-being. At the same time, the results extend existing literature by offering a context-specific, expert-validated model tailored to the banking sector in a provincial Iranian setting. By integrating structural, relational, and psychological dimensions, the proposed model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and managing human resource retention in Bank Melli.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research adopted a qualitative, expert-based design with a relatively small sample size, which, although appropriate for exploratory and theory-building purposes, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study focused on a single banking organization within one province, and contextual factors specific to Bank Melli or East Azerbaijan Province may have influenced expert perceptions. Third, the reliance on expert judgments may have introduced subjective bias, as participants' views are shaped by their professional experiences and organizational positions.

Future studies could extend this research by quantitatively testing the proposed strategic human resource retention model using survey data from a larger sample of bank employees across multiple regions. Comparative studies across different banks, provinces, or sectors could help identify contextual similarities and differences in retention dynamics. Longitudinal research designs may also be employed to examine how changes in strategic HR practices influence retention over time. Additionally, future research could explore the interaction between digital HR technologies and human-centered retention strategies in greater depth.

From a practical perspective, managers and policymakers in banking organizations should view retention as a strategic, system-wide responsibility rather than an isolated HR function. Emphasis should be placed on enhancing transparency, justice, supportive leadership, and employee well-being alongside professional development opportunities. Non-financial recognition mechanisms and feedback systems should be strengthened to reinforce organizational belonging. Finally, retention strategies should be regularly reviewed and adapted to align with organizational strategy, regulatory constraints, and evolving employee expectations.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

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