An exploration of strategies to restore morale in non-academic staff in the higher education sector: A case of Chinhoyi University of Technology

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The study sought to explore strategies to restore morale in non-academic staff in the higher education sector with specific reference to Chinhoyi University of Technology. In February and March 2021, the study was conducted using a qualitative research approach and a case study research design. The data gathering tools used were an in-depth interview guide and document review, with a sample size of twenty (20) participants. The absence of upward mobility and management's inconsistent approach were determined to be the main reasons of employee demoralization in the study. Wage differentials negatively affected many employees in the organisation and morale was low, it results in a lack of job satisfaction, less employee engagement and causes labour turnover. Some strategies to restore morale among non-academic staff employees were suggested. They include employee recognition programmes and transparent job evaluations to reduce wage inequalities. The recommendations were that university authorities in liaison with the parent ministry of higher and tertiary education should carry out fair and transparent job evaluations such that the grading system for employees is not tilted to one side. Conditions of service for employees should be negotiated unlike just imposing as evidenced by documentary evidence.

Keywords: Wage differential, Non-academic staff, Strategies, Morale, Restore

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Introduction

Morale is an intangible concept that refers to how positive and supportive a group feels toward the organization to which it belongs (Haddock, 2010), as well as the special feelings members of the group share with others, such as trust, self-worth, purpose, pride in one's accomplishments, and faith in the leadership and organizational success. Morale is influenced more from the top down than from the bottom up. Morale is not determined by a single thing; it is determined by a collection of linked factors. Changes in the internal and external environment, as well as the leadership response to those changes, are among these elements (ibid). These concepts show how important morale is in organizations and how it relates to the environment and leadership.

Today's worldwide e-commerce, in general, and the higher education sector, in particular, are under increasing constraints that will put additional strain on their capacities and limit their ability to satisfy growing stakeholder demands. Changes in the funding formula, changes in the grading system, and a considerable drop in staff morale are all part of the volatile higher education sector environment (Mahlahla, 2018). Employees' confidence and performance are harmed as a result of these issues (Robbins, 2003). Employees' faith in the institution's leaders becomes a crucial problem at this point. Prior leadership study has demonstrated that how a leader acts and interacts with followers during difficult times can lay the groundwork for future trust (Kasper-Fuehrer & Ashkanasy, 2001). Employees stay where morale is good, institutional support is visible and ubiquitous, and they have a feeling of belonging (Mellow et al., 2003). (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002). According to Naris and Ukpere (2010), it is critical for tertiary educational institutions to attract and retain qualified, experienced, and competent staff in order to provide successful service delivery in a changing environment. Most higher education institutions have struggled with poor morale, increased workload, and exclusion from decision-making processes, thus this has been a concern. If these issues are not addressed in higher education institutions, they will have a cascading effect on the functioning and delivery of higher education services, thereby harming economic development (Mawonde, 2015).

Since its inception, Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT), as one of Zimbabwe's fourteen public universities, has used HRM techniques and practices to inspire and retain exceptional personnel, recognizing the importance of people to the university's future success and the cost of losing staff. On the other hand, information on the ground suggests that senior and non-academic staff employees are leaving. Two professors, including the then-Deputy Registrar, departed the institution to become the Registrar and Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). According to the Annual Report (2019) of Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT), senior staff turnover is becoming a persistent trend at the university. Based on payroll records as of February 2020, the senior non-academic staff category of employees has been the most variable over the last decade (2010 to 2020), with a high turnover rate ranging between 18.3 per cent and 33.3 per cent per year. Since October 2019, there has been a discriminatory trend in remuneration practices, with some lecturers and other non-academic personnel being considered as directly participating in lecture delivery while others are not. Despite the fact that all employees are part of the university system, this is not the case within the institution, in terms of remuneration practices. This tendency is not only concerning, but also dangerous, because humans are difficult to copy as assets, making them a critical competitive edge for a company in today's high-stakes economic environment (Kumar & Wang, 2012). As a result, the goal of this article is to "examine measures to restore non-academic staff morale in state institutions from participants' own viewpoints."

Methodology

The report used a qualitative method and a case study research design (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The qualitative research approach was chosen because it allows for the discovery of fresh information as well as the discovery of dimensions such as beliefs, thoughts, and motivations(Duke Kunshan University,2017). Qualitative methodologies can help you comprehend complex relationships, which is important when it comes to employee engagement and morale. Since the study was limited to a single organization, a case study design was more appropriate. The researcher chose an exploratory case study because while implementing differential wage rates has been observed

As a measure of staff retention by state universities, it also displays astonishing psychological impacts on employees, which may not lead to the expected results at the end of the day. Purposive sampling was used in this research. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, relies on the researcher's judgment when selecting the units to be investigated (Wilson,2010).

This entails locating and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are particularly educated or experienced about a topic of interest (Cresswell & Clark, 2011). Purposive sampling was used in this study because the problem under investigation requires participants to have knowledge and experience with salary differentials. According to Kothari (2004), the size of the population must be considered when determining the sample size because this limits the sample size (Husain & Javed, 2019; Javed, Husain, et al., 2020; Javed, Khan, et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2017; Khan & Javed, 2016). The researcher spoke with twenty (20) employees from Chinhoyi University of Technology's non-academic division, out of a total of 260 employees on permanent contracts. The twenty participants, who worked in various university departments, were qualified to participate if they had worked for a year or more, were not directly involved in the institution's lecture delivery and were willing to give informed consent. The Human Resources Department assisted in the recruitment of participants. The researcher acquired information from employees in salary differentials set up, which was the problem under study, using document examination and in-depth interviews. As a result, the information gathered was study-specific. The two study instruments were deemed the best data collection tools for gaining access to wage differentials and employee morale information, as well as allowing for flexible and in-depth investigation of the topic. In-depth interview questions elicit explanatory comments that are culturally relevant and important to participants, allowing for a deeper knowledge of the topic under research. In this qualitative study, generalizability is less important than acquiring a rich, nuanced, and profound understanding of a topic from the perspective of a specific group of people (Anderson,2010).

Literature Review

Employee's morale in higher education

Employee morale, according to Rizwan (2010), is the emotions, attitude, satisfaction, and overall outlook of employees during their time at work. Cheerful or high employee morale is defined as employees who are pleased and positive at work.Negative or low employee morale is defined as a company's ability to retain employees who are unsatisfied and negative about their work environment(Javed & Husain, 2021). Positive employee morale is typically indicated by confidence, discipline, and eagerness to perform (Grensing, 2010). Other research (Millett, 2018; Neely, 2019) has found that low morale can erode employees' dedication over time, negatively impact the product or service they provide, and alienate clients and consumers. In Saudi Arabia, Nasir and Mahmood (2018) conducted a study to determine the impact of human resource management (HRM) methods on employee retention in Pakistan's higher education industry in Karachi(Javed, Malik, et al., 2020). Supervisor support has a positive connection with the dependent variable (employee retention), indicating that if supervisors provide more assistance to subordinates, employee retention will be higher as well.The dependent variable (employee retention) has a positive connection with reward and recognition, indicating that if a firm provides incentives and recognition to its employees, employee retention will be higher as well. Work-life policies were also found to have a positive connection with the dependent variable (employee retention), indicating that if a firm provides better work-life balance policies to its employees, employee retention and morale will improve.

Wage differentials and employee morale

Mupandawana (2012) research study revealed that wage differentials has become a major force in many organisations. Wage differentials have affected the way employees perform their jobs to satisfaction. The study discovered reduced employee performance, reduced productivity growth and increased labour turnover(Javed & Azhar, 2017). According to Becker (2014), increasing salary disparity may weaken the incentives to invest in vocational education, resulting in lower productivity development. According to Akerlof and Yellen (2008), agents who perceive they are underpaid put in less effort, and the evidence is strongest in the provision of services by workers who are made to believe they are undervalued.

Salaries become a crucial part of being effective when they are significantly linked to performance (Umar,2012). Fair wages are the most difficult challenge for the services industry, but they are also the most important for workers, because pay represent the magnitude of the value of their work among the workers, their families, and their communities.

Strategies for restoring morale between various groups of employees

Make an effort to be transparent

When morale is down, one of the worst things a manager can do is act as if everything is fine. Rather than brushing staff morale issues under the carpet, they must be addressed head on (Schuler, 2004). As a result, as a manager, you may earn the respect and buy-in of your organization's staff and collaborate on a solution(ibid).

Recognizing others

As one of the causes of low morale is a lack of recognition, it is in the best interests of organizational leadership to focus on the team's bright spots, praise individual accomplishments (large or small), and honor individuals who show good leadership(Husain et al., 2021; Javed, 2018; Javed & Khan, 2017). Taking the time to recognize and celebrate your team's accomplishments within the organization. Not only should hard skills and results be recognized, but so should soft skills (Armstrong,2014).

Provide opportunities for advancement

Managers are advised to promote employee development and have regular career dialogues with them to keep staff motivated (Dye & Garman, 2006). Employees will be more engaged if they have the opportunity to learn new skills and are challenged in their current position.

Theoretical framework for the study

The literature on performance management and employee morale is broadly conceptualized within the framework of motivational theories, as Kandula (2006) argued that no performance can ever be successful unless the motivational composition of individuals is correctly understood and managed

Effectively. As a result, those who are highly motivated produce excellent results. Employee engagement, job embeddedness, and expectancy theories all played a role in the research.

The three-part model of employee engagement proposed by Macey and Schneider

Employee engagement can be thought of in three ways, according to Macey and Schneider (2008): state, trait, and behavioral engagement. Employee engagement is built on three major components, according to this tripartite view. Positive effect, energy, absorption, and enthusiasm are all components of state involvement, which is a strong affective emotional component. Employee engagement is influenced by the social climate and social learning of an organization, which is founded on the assumption that people with similar personalities can be found in the same work setting or environment (Husain & Javed, 2019; Javed, Husain, et al., 2020). The impact of strategic organizational climates such as working conditions and service conditions on an employee's level of involvement in an organization is known as behavioral engagement. Here, engagement is defined as a series of interconnected behaviors. The organization level approach was incorporated into Macey and Schneider's concept of employee engagement since it is congruent with their tripartite construct, indicating attributes such as positive effect, feelings of empowerment, and organizational citizenship behaviors. "The antecedents of engagement are rooted in the environment under which individuals work, and the outcomes that are regarded to be of value to organizational effectiveness," according to Macey and Schneider (2008).

Justification for Macey and Schneider's Tripartite Employee Engagement Concept

The behavioural engagement concept of the tripartite theory of employee engagement, which involves the influence of strategic organizational climates such as working conditions and conditions of service on an employee's level of engagement in an organization, supports the claim that an organization's compensation policies can have a significant impact on an employee's level of engagement. Understanding what employees require will allow the company to develop successful retention strategies that will address the needs

Of employees while also improving their morale (Nguyen,2012). Employers value employee management because high levels of engagement lead to behaviors like maximizing discretionary effort, taking or aligning actions with organizational needs, and a variety of organizational benefits like higher productivity, lower staff turnover, better attendance, and improved safety (Armstrong, 2010).

Theory of Job Embeddedness

According to Mitchell et al. (2001), employees stay in a company as long as the incentives to stay there meet or surpass their expectations. Employees' decisions to stay or quit the organization are influenced by their job embeddedness. Individuals who are immersed in their jobs are less inclined to leave the company, which has a beneficial impact on their performance. Organizations should make sure that their employees are job-embedded, since this will prevent them from leaving, resulting in employee retention. Through the three characteristics of employment embeddedness: linkages, fit, and sacrifice, human resource practitioners should aim to guarantee that people are embedded in their jobs. The ties dimension describes the employee's interactions with other members of the organization. Employees will be more committed to their employment if they have solid workplace relationships, which can be achieved by having members work in teams. The second dimension of fit refers to an employee's compatibility with their work and in the workplace. As a result, the human resource department should make sure that the individual's needs, such as career aspirations, personal values, and future ambitions, are aligned with the company's goals and plans. This will ensure that the employee feels connected to the company, ensuring that the person is retained and their performance improves. In the job embeddedness theory, sacrifice is the third dimension. When an employee decides to leave the company, he will feel and face the loss of sacrifice. When an employee leaves the company, he will forfeit fascinating initiatives, appealing benefits and compensation, the opportunity to work with colleagues with whom he has grown close, and promotion opportunities. When it comes to retaining employees, companies like Chinhoyi University of Technology benefit from job embeddedness because it allows the university to understand why people choose to stay, allowing it to develop retention measures that are suited for the organization.

Mitchell, et al. 2001)The chosen results might be linked to the desired performance levels by the university administration. Managers must ensure that staff can attain the desired levels of performance. Employees who have excelled in their jobs should be rewarded. In the organization, the reward system must be fair and just. Organizations must create occupations that are engaging, dynamic, and demanding.

Motivational Theory of Expectancy

Victor Vroom of Yale School of Management proposed the expectation theory in 1964. (Armstrong, 2005). Unlike Maslow and Herzberg, Vroom emphasizes and focuses on outcomes rather than needs. According to the idea, the degree of a desire to act in a certain way is determined by the intensity of an expectation that the performance would be followed by a specific outcome and the appeal of the outcome to the individual. According to Cole (2000), employee motivation is a result of an individual's desire for a reward (Valence), an appraisal of the likelihood that effort will lead to expected performance (Expectancy), and the belief that performance will lead to reward (Instrumentality). In a nutshell, valence is the significance that an individual attaches to an expected event. It is the expected, not the actual, satisfaction that an employee expects to experience as a result of meeting objectives. Expectancy is the belief that putting in more effort will result in greater results. Expectancy is determined by elements such as having the correct talents for the work, having the suitable resources, having the right information, and having the necessary assistance to do the project. Instrumentality is the belief that if you do your job well, you will get a valid result. Instrumentality is influenced by elements such as trust in the people who decide who gets what outcome, the ease with which the process of determining who gets what outcome is carried out, and the clarity of the relationship between performance and outcomes. As a result, expectation theory focuses on the following three connections:

Effort-performance relationship: How likely is it that the individual's efforts will be recognized in his performance evaluation?

The extent to which an employee feels that receiving a positive performance appraisal leads to organizational benefits is referred to as the performance-reward relationship.

The relationship between rewards and personal goals is all about the attractiveness or appeal of the possible reward to the individual.Vroom believed that employees voluntarily choose whether or not to perform in the job (Ritson, 2008). This decision was completely based on the level of motivation of the employee, which is determined by three factors: expectation, valence, and instrumentality (ibid).

Expectancy theory's justifications

Hellriegel, Slocum, and Woodman (2001) suggested that employees of a company can sign into a labor contract with a moderate level of expectation and emotional contentment about the compensation they expect. The organization's management, on the other hand, can and will have a transformative effect on that emotional contract, influencing their employees positively or badly. The psychological contract is explored using the process approach, which is when a worker freely agrees to perform services for pay in exchange for compensation.The employee acknowledges that his or her monetary or non-monetary pay is equal to or greater than the time, energy, and effort he or she will devote to the organization. Employees, likewise, agree to be compensated in exchange for their resources, time, talent, and energy. As a result, the importance of conducting interviews and conversations prior to signing an employment contract, as well as ongoing collective bargaining, cannot be overstated. In order to keep employees (and hence avoid emigration or high turnover costs), the company must be able to appropriately evaluate these emotional or psychological contracts and successfully negotiate them with them. In addition, "management must devise systems to incentivize the desired behavior" (Marchington &Wilkinson, 2005)."People are driven to work when they expect to attain what they want from their jobs," according to the expectation theory. Employees are reasonable people, according to a core premise of the expectation theory. Before they complete their work, they consider what they need to do to be rewarded and what the benefits mean to them" (Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman, 2001). The expectation theory is based on the expectations that employees bring to work, as well as the environment and manner in which these expectations are met (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). The expectation model is based on the idea that an organization's management is responsible for both motivating people through everyday activities and producing at the highest level possible.

Employee engagement and morale are inextricably linked to motivation, and it is possible to claim that the management styles used by an organization have a direct impact on the level of employee engagement. When considering management styles inside an organization and how they effect employee loyalty, it's equally important to examine the staff's expectations when they first join.According to McGregor, the third and fourth assumptions of the theory Y perspective of human behavior are as follows: People will practice self-direction and self-control in service of goals to which they are committed. People have potential, and given the right circumstances, they may learn to embrace and seek responsibility, as well as use their ingenuity and creativity in the workplace.

Furthermore, according to expectancy theory, "management must demonstrate to employees that their efforts will be recognized and rewarded, both financially and non-financially" (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). Individual views about effort-performance correlations and the desirability of various job outcomes associated with different performance levels determine work motivation, according to the expectation model" (Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman, 2001).

Expectancy Theory's Importance in This Study

The expectation model justifies the impact of compensation on employee motivation and engagement. An employee's expectation of recognition and perks has a direct impact on his or her level of commitment to the organization, which is a direct measure of an employee's level of engagement with the organization. The expectancy theory also explains how perception affects choices, expectations, and preferences. As a result, it may be claimed that an employee's impression of a company's compensation structure has a significant impact on employee engagement and morale. The application of the expectation theory was supported by empirical evidence in a study conducted by Neely (2019), which established a pattern linking employee productivity and morale.

Outcome

The data presented here include demographic information on the research participants as well as their ideas for restoring workplace morale.

Response Rate

The researcher conducted the interviews at the participants' place of work and the response rate was hundred percent (100%) as all participants were interviewed.

Demographic Data

The following information pertains to the background of twenty (20) employees who made up the research study's sample size.

The Participants' Gender Profiles

Gender profile data from Chinhoyi University of Technology shows that there are fewer females than males, with females accounting for 8 (40%) of total participants compared to 12 (60%) of their male counterparts.

Participants' Age Distribution

The study included people of all working age groups, with participants ranging in age from 25 to 65.

Participants' Educational Background

Seven (7) people, or 35 percent of those interviewed, had a master's degree, four (20 percent) were managers, and three (15 percent) were junior employees. Six (30%) of the participants had management positions in the organization and had completed their studies to the first degree level. Furthermore, seven (35%) of the younger staff members had completed high school.

Participants' length of service and kind of employment

For both management and non-managerial individuals, the average time spent in their roles was greater than ten years.All of the participants were employed on a long-term basis.

In-depth Interviews Outcome

Theme 1:Level of employee morale

Participants reported that morale was very low morale among non academic members of staff. In response to the question, "How likely are you to stay with the university?" Participant 8 said;

"Once I get a chance to go I can go,here you can't enjoy the work when the salary is low and no promotion even with a higher qualification".

Participant 9 also said that;

My days here are numbered as you know that Iam serving my three months notice period.I cannot hold on to this post when someone of my same grade is getting more than me.What is the difference with me,you know ten thousand salary difference with someone doing same job with me irks me so much".

Participant 10 on the question "what are your feelings about wage differential at your work place?" said that;

"Wage differentials between directly involved and the none directly involved is so significant especially between various grade notches.However,such differentials positively contribute to our working hard to get promoted and also attain higher qualifications".

Participant 12 said;

"As a worker,Iam not happy with such a huge difference between similar grades and sometimes I have to be absent at work to do some self jobs in order to supplement my meagre salary.Uuumm this situation is terribly bad".

The prevalent feeling was that wage differentials negatively affected most of the employees in the organisation and morale was low.

Theme 2: Strategies for restoring morale among non academic employees

Participants indicated that working under an environment of wage differentials brings in a lot of discomfort and uncertainty.The strategies to close wage gaps and improve morale they reported herein range from giving employees recognition,being transparent and evaluating pay scales for employees.

Employee Recognition

Thirteen(13) constituting sixty five percent(65%) of the participants reported that it is a very good idea for the employer to recognise personal growth effort of individual employees. For example on the question,"Which strategies do you think can be applied to restore morale among non-academic staff employees?"participant 13 said:

"The university management should recognise employees with qualifications like a Master's degree and promote them to some teaching positions.We are seeing a lot of outsiders coming

To fill up posts here when they are internal members of staff with similar qualifications".

Participant 14 said:

"Management should initiate job evaluation for all employees in a transparent manner.Right now there is no logic on the salary differences between employees of the same job title.How can you say someone is directly involved and someone is not,yet we are all university staff providing support services to the core business of the university".

From the findings discussed above,employees greatly feel that employee recognition and transparent job evaluation would reduce wage inequalities and improve morale in the workplace.

Documentary Analysis

The information provided by the participants was triangulated by using document review.The data collected from the HR department at Chinhoyi University indicated that there was a memorandum dated 25 September 2019 from the parent ministry which provided for a new grading system. Academic and non academic employees from grade 3(a) up to 13(a) were categorised as those directly involved in the lecture delivery to students and had a new pay scale effective from 1st of October 2019. Employees with job titles not mentioned in that memorandum were to remain in the old grades and were deemed not directly involved in the lecture delivery.There were huge differences of up to ten thousand RTGS dollars between similar grades like grade 8 and grade 8(a). In between University grades,there were progression notches which were frozen through a government circular dated May 2012. The main reason attached to the circular was to reduce government expenditure. HR records also indicated that four secretaries and three security staff members resigned from their employment in the year 2020 to do their personal businesses.Two former library staff members left for greener pastures outside the country.The documentary records supported the existence of wage differential challenge within the organisation as was indicated by participants 10 and 12 above. The data supported theme 1 identified above.

Discussion

As all participants were questioned, the response rate was one hundred percent

(100%). According to Babbie (2002), any response rate of 50% or more is sufficient for analysis, hence the response rate of 100% was acceptable. Females made up a smaller percentage of the study's participants than males. This indicates that the majority of the concepts persisting in the organization are patriarchal in nature. Women have a lower presence due to preconceptions about women in African culture, which dictates that women should stay at home to cook and scrub while males work as the family's head. Information from different age groups of the participants was represented. The inclusion of people of all ages contributes to the study's broadening of views, which are generally motivated by sharing comparable generational perspectives on how to rebuild morale. Employees with a bachelor's degree made up more than 60% of the participants. This indicates that the institution hires degreed personnel for managerial roles and has a higher number of employees with higher qualifications at the junior level.

The general consensus was that wage disparities harmed the majority of the company's employees, and morale was low. The findings support those of an earlier study by Ewton (2017), which found that employee morale is linked to absenteeism, which has been estimated to cost large businesses in the United States up to $760 000 per year in direct payroll costs, and even more when lower productivity, lost revenue, and other negative effects of low morale are taken into account. An institution's morale can be costly. Morale is also said to be the gasoline that propels a company forward or the fuel that stokes the fires of employee dissatisfaction and bad performance (ibid). Employee appreciation and honest job appraisal, according to the report, will help to eliminate salary disparities and boost workplace morale. The findings are consistent with a Domfeh (2016) study that found that HR managers use a competitive wage package, job security, challenging and fascinating employment possibilities, and strong training and development chances as the primary strategies for keeping employees in their organizations. Employees were also likely to leave since the proposed retention tactics were not adequately executed in their departments, according to Domfeh (2016). The employees' long tenure at the company was primarily owing to the economy's lack of job opportunities.

Conclusion

Primary data indicated that the dominant view from participants was that the main causes of employee demoralization were lack of upward mobility and inconsistent approach by management. From the data gathered it was observed that the prevalent feeling was that wage differentials negatively affected most of the employees in the organisation and morale was low. Wage differentials results in lack of job satisfaction, less employee engagement and causes labour turnover. On the basis of the responses provided some strategies to restore morale among non-academic staff employees were suggested. They include employee recognition programmes and transparent job evaluation to reduce wage inequalities.

Recommendations

The university authorities in liaison with the parent ministry of higher and tertiary education should carry out fair and transparent job evaluations such that the grading system for employees is not tilted to one side for employees. Alternatively,they can resort to the old grading system which seemed to be fair to employees without huge salary differences between grades. Conditions of service for employees should be negotiated unlike just imposing as evidenced by a memorandum from the government ministry that spoke about directly involved and none directly involved in the lecture delivery. Internal staff promotions should be institutionalized as most participants bemoaned lack of recognition by management when they attain higher qualifications. Government can lift the ban on salary progression matters,that is increment through notches.This emanates from the results which revealed that there is a government freeze in terms of grade notch progression.Through a one-time issuing of survey instrument, this study collected case study data at a specific moment in time. It is suggested that a longitudinal study design with a sample size of at least 200 participants be pursued on the same topic to holistically evaluate the techniques to restore morale in non-academic employees in higher education. Researchers would be able to examine the growth patterns of internal staff recognition programs, turnover rates, and job satisfaction levels as indicators of employee morale in the organization with this longitudinal study.

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