

## **Employee preferences for industry retention strategies: the case of Macau's**

### **“Golden Nest Eggs”**

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## **Abstract**

High employee turnover is a continuing challenge for hospitality and tourism, notably in the tightly regulated labor market of Macau where hotel room capacity is expanding rapidly. To promote staff retention during this period of supply-led business growth, all of Macau's major casino operators have adopted "Golden Nest Egg" employee retention programs. This study investigates how employees view such schemes and whether they influence intentions to stay, with particular reference to gender and to organizational culture (Chinese or international). The findings offer an empirical basis to guide casino operators in formulating and refining retention strategies. The paper contributes to scholarship by exploring employee receptiveness to the merits of different inducements, notably training and development provision or financial benefits.

**Keywords:** Staff retention, labor turnover, casino, hospitality and tourism

## **Introduction**

Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR) has been Asia's dominant casino and gaming destination over the past decade and visitor numbers and expenditures have been impressive (Zeng & Prentice, 2014). Casinos and gaming generate almost 80 percent of Macau's annual revenues and provide employment for 13.7 percent of its working population (Li, 2017; Wan, 2014). In 2014, Macau's gaming revenue was seven times that of Las Vegas (Sheng & Zhao, 2016). This scale is unprecedented in human history and results in both challenges and opportunities for the various operators. Whilst the tourism and casino context of Las Vegas offers some insights into future supply and demand related trends, a true understanding should be based on an analysis of the local situation.

Following the extended period of spectacular growth, tourism growth stalled during 2014 and 2015. Macau's dominant source of business was negatively impacted by the so-called "crackdown" on corruption by the Government of China. The Chinese authorities also expressed concern about the impact of over-dependence on gaming for the diversity and hence solidity of Macau's economic base (Sheng & Zhao, 2016). The Government of Macau has also tackled the gaming over-dependency by shifting focus to the meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) sector. This has served to cool the overexpansion which has characterized the gambling industry (Li, 2017). Actions have included the formation of a committee to oversee MICE developments which has implemented a "Strategic MICE Market Stimulation Program" to attract more international MICE events, host more exhibitions and develop the business travel market (Li, 2017; McCartney, 2014).

The SAR government is also extending infrastructural provision (Li, 2017), with the Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macau Bridge and Macau Light Rail Transit (LRT) currently under construction. These initiatives will progressively establish vital connections for Macau with mainland China and Hong Kong (Li, 2017). In addition to following the Las Vegas development model of family-friendliness and world class MICE facilities, the Government is establishing Macau as a center for offshore companies, building a trading platform for Chinese medicines and nurturing the creative industries (Sheng & Zhao, 2016).

Despite the slowdown, Macau has continued to attract overseas investments in integrated resort casinos (Wan, 2014). The willingness of investors to plan and develop vast new complexes reflects confidence that visitor and revenue growth is resuming. As an indication of Macau's global scale of operations, gaming revenues first surpassed those of Las Vegas in 2006 (Devoss, 2008; Lei & Lam, 2015). Supply continues to expand and it is forecast that the current stock of 28,000 rooms will grow to 50,000 by 2018/19. Such break-neck growth creates an environment which generates temptations for employees to transfer across to alternative employers offering inducements or better terms and conditions.

In the face of rapidly growing visitation and room supply, Macau's tourism and gaming industries will continue to expand their workforce at all levels. Researchers have noted that the gaming industry pays higher salaries than most other sectors and has thus attracted many local employees (Wan, 2014). In 2015, two-thirds of Macau's GDP and 25% of its total employment were attributable to the service industries (Li, 2017). Recent media reports reported that one of the major casino operations, MGM Macau was offering more

than 1,200 new jobs, extending to about 6,000 positions across its non-gaming and gaming departments (Newsdesk, 2016). Symptomatic of the tight labor market, Macau's unemployment rate has been consistently below 2% during the period since 2013. This is attributable to the decade long rapid development of the hospitality and gaming industry (Employment Survey, 2015).

Faced with high employment rates, Macau's tourism and gaming industry employers have struggled to recruit sufficient skilled workers and professionals (Chiu, 2011). With an underdeveloped system of education and vocational training, Macau's service industries have been unable to cultivate a well-educated workforce and have experienced shortages of skilled labor (Li, 2017). This dilemma has prompted an increased emphasis on staff retention and provides a rationale for conducting the present investigation.

It has been widely reported that higher salaries do not always increase job satisfaction (Morrison, 2016). Macau's high labor turnover rates may be attributable to poor organizational cultures, inadequate attention to job satisfaction, and low commitment at organizational level, thereby impacting on the management of talented employees within organizational settings. Despite this challenging environment, it is worth noting that some Macau operators have installed well-developed recruitment systems and provide staff development opportunities.

There is a growing need for proactive and coordinated talent management policies and for quality education to plan for and address future talent shortfalls in tourism (Scowsill, 2015). Historically, organizations in Macau have tended to look locally when developing talent retention programs. The government, for example, has sought to attract, develop

and retain talent, through mechanisms such as a Talents Development Committee and a Task Force which sponsors the acquisition of overseas training by Macau citizens. Faced with the ever-changing nature of the global gaming economy and associated workforce, Macau's tourism and casino employers are challenged to implement effective marketing strategies, deliver quality service and maintain a competitive business environment (Li, 2017).

In this context, it is important to understand how corporate strategies and government regulations are impacting on Macau's labor market. Competition is growing from across the Asia-Pacific region with a proliferation of the integrated resort casino (IRC) model. In the face of this challenging labor market, Macau's casino operators have introduced various "Golden Nest Egg" programs to reduce the employee turnover rate through retention, improving job satisfaction, and attracting skilled workers and professionals (Sherrie, N.D.). The expression "Golden Nest Egg" refers to a program a program that is offered by one of the Macau operators – Melco Resorts and Entertainment – of six months pay after three years of continuous service (Wilhelm, 2017).

Previous researchers have noted the influence of the following factors as antecedents of turnover: personal characteristics, overall satisfaction with aspects of or with jobs, other dimensions of work experience (such as leader-member exchange or participative management), external environment factors, behavioral predictors, and cognitions and behaviors about the withdrawal process (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Research outputs over the past two decades have attributed turnover to several causes: individual differences, the attitudes of established employees (e.g. job satisfaction), the attitudes of new recruits (e.g. stress and strain, exhaustion), organizational characteristics,

interpersonal relationships, withdrawal cognitions (e.g. organizational commitment), and perceived alternatives (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, & Eberly, 2008). In the context of hospitality employees, a number of factors have been identified as predictors of retention. These include job satisfaction, extrinsic rewards, constituent attachments, organizational commitment, organization prestige, and lack of alternatives (Hausknecht, Rodda, & Howard, 2009).

The present study extends this focus on the employee perspective and investigates the appeal of various retention programs amongst the workforce. This will provide an empirically-based foundation that offers casino operators with a basis for formulating, reviewing and refining such programs. Using Macau as a setting, this exploratory study examines the extent to which such retention schemes appeal to casino workers. The questions that are considered focus on the comparative appeal of different retention programs and potential gender-based disparities, namely whether female casino workers perceive matters differently from their male counterparts. The two following research questions (RQs) are proposed:

RQ1. Are the various casino retention programs attractive to gaming industry employees? Which are the best received and why?

RQ2. Are there any disparities between the perceptions of various “Golden Nest Egg” programs amongst male and female workers, referring to the relative appeal of training opportunities, career advancement, and financial rewards?

The paper contributes to knowledge in three ways. Firstly, it will provide empirically-based evidence to challenge or support factors that have a causal relationship with staff retention. Secondly, and drawing upon results from six large casino and integrated resort

organizations it proposes managerial implications for the industry. Thirdly, it contributes to scholarship by exploring employee receptiveness to the respective merits of training and financially oriented inducements in a full employment setting.

### **The research context: Macau's casino and gaming industry**

Covering a small landmass (about 30km<sup>2</sup>) located in southern China, Macau SAR is located close to Hong Kong. The latter has 33 times the area of Macau, as well as a larger population (7 million). However, Hong Kong's stock of hotel rooms amounts to about 80,000, little more than Macau's prospective offering, once the current round of capacity increases is concluded. Expanding room capacity coincides with a determination by the Macau government about whether to extend the gaming licenses of the "big six" operators (the current licenses conclude in 2020 and 2022). This is leading to an interesting confluence between supply and demand, corporate strategy and government policies within Macau and across Greater China. The present researchers also note the emerging intersection between the corporate and educational worlds alongside the government. This is epitomized by the large scale "philanthropic" donations by two of the "big six" casino operators to the SAR's only public university – the University of Macau.

During the 12 years that followed Macau's initial liberalization of gaming (in 2002), the sector expanded rapidly. Macau's emergence as a global tourism destination occurred through the transformation of the various casino properties into larger, more wholesome Las Vegas-style integrated resorts that attract conventions and also tourists who will shop, eat, and enjoy cultural activities rather than focus exclusively on gambling (Li, 2017). As the only jurisdiction in China with legalized casino gambling, Macau attracted 20 million Chinese visitors and gaming revenues exceeded 12 billion U.S. dollars in 2008 (Zeng,



Prentice & King, 2014). Tens of millions of Chinese tourists visit Macau annually, with the initial surge attributable to the launch of the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) which simplified the application process and opened Macau to mainland Chinese travelers (Lei & Lam, 2015). Although the anti-corruption policy has dampened casino revenues, visitation has not fallen (Macao Statistics and Census Services, 2015). The growth of visitor arrivals is likely to return as the IVS is progressively launched into an expanded list of mainland cities (Lei & Lam, 2015).

Gaming liberalization prompted a construction boom and buoyant employment. One solution that many other jurisdictions have adopted to address local labor shortages is the hiring of non-residents. In the period following 2007, the Macau government instigated various programs targeting a growth of imported labor (Sou & McCartney, 2015). Labor-importation policies were progressively streamlined to address the lack of a well-educated workforce (Li, 2017). Macau's casino operators are undoubtedly receptive to employing overseas workers, particularly as the prevailing salaries are relatively lower than those applicable to locals. Hiring non-resident employees has however become increasingly restricted as the Macau government has progressively pursued a policy of plentiful work opportunities for local residents (The "Boletim Oficial Da Região Administrativa Especial De Macau — I Série"). Such restrictions are now being tightened, as evidenced by the stringency attached to the retention process for work permits by non-local executives. The practice of exclusively employing Macanese as casino dealers is vigorously supported by various local associations and trade unions. The monopoly deployment of locals as dealers (who distribute the cards in casino games) combined with other labor restrictions hamper the capacity of casino operators to employ the right balance of resident and non-resident labor.

There are six licensed casino operators in Macau – Melco Resorts and Entertainment, which operates City of Dreams (COD), Sociedade de Jogos de Macau Holdings (SJM), Sands Chain Ltd. (Sands), Galaxy Entertainment Group (Galaxy), Wynn Resorts (Wynn) and MGM China (MGM). The characteristics of these organizations are outlined in Figure 1.

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**Insert Figure 1 here**

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Each operator announced and progressively launched an employee retention program through the course of 2015. The respective programs that are listed in Figure 2 were applicable at the end of that year. The researchers have proposed three categorizations. The first emphasizes the provision of training opportunities. The other two focus on the financial dimension, with employees having the prospect of stock or cash acquisitions. To minimize potential conflicts of interest and to respect confidentiality, the program names are listed alphabetically.

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**Insert Figure 2 here**

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## **Literature Review**

### ***Employee Turnover***

Employee turnover describes the departure of an employee who has occupied a position within a company and which leads to a complete termination of the employee-employer relationship (Mobley, 1977). Wanous (1979) has observed two categories of turnover behavior: voluntary and involuntary. The former refers to staff who seek to end the

employer-employee relationship on a voluntary basis; the latter refers to staff who leave involuntarily, for example, when they are terminated (Yang, Wan, & Fu, 2011). Voluntary turnover is the focus of the present paper.

The problems associated with a high turnover rate have been widely investigated within hospitality and tourism (Woods & Macaulay, 1989; Darr, Argote, & Epple, 1995; Alonso & O'Neill, 2009; Dickerson, 2009; Brown, Thomas, & Bosselman, 2015). It has been observed that turnover leads to the degradation of overall organizational performance (Woods & Macaulay, 1989; Darr, Argote, & Epple, 1995). Turnover produces poor sales and customer service and can also contribute to the accumulated depreciation of knowledge (Woods & Macaulay, 1989; Darr, Argote, & Epple, 1995). It leads to increased costs for the recruitment and training of new staff (Woods & Macaulay, 1989), lowers company stock prices and interrupts careers and professional development opportunities (Woods & Macaulay, 1989). Labor turnover may also be a distraction for the remaining employees (Woods & Macaulay, 1989; Alonso & O'Neill, 2009; Dickerson, 2009; Brown, Thomas, & Bosselman, 2015). It may undermine organizational climate by reducing morale within workgroups (Woods & Macaulay, 1989; Alonso & O'Neill, 2009; Dickerson, 2009), thereby lessening organizational commitment and loyalty (Brown, Thomas, & Bosselman, 2015), and threatening interpersonal relationships between stakeholders (Chalkiti & Carson, 2010).

Investigations within different contexts such as Macau are needed if these negative impacts are to be minimized (Woods & Macaulay, 1989). The factors that cause employee departures may be categorized into five: inappropriate recruiting processes (Lo & Lam, 2002; Pizam & Thornburg, 2000), inappropriate work placement (Lo & Lam, 2002),

dissatisfaction with salary, benefits and job opportunities (Cho, Woods, Jang, & Erdem, 2006; Lo & Lam, 2002), the inappropriate management of staff (Kim, Lee, & Carlson, 2010; Cho et al., 2006; Lo & Lam, 2002), and job stress and burnout (Chalkiti & Sigala, 2010; O'Neill & Xiao, 2010; Shani & Pizam, 2009). In the hospitality and tourism context, the reasons may be internal and/or external (Woods & Macaulay, 1989). Internal reasons concern work-related factors such as low wages, long working hours, and limited career opportunities. These can lead employees to an increased intention to leave the hospitality and tourism industry and transfer to other industries offering better working conditions (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Walsh & Taylor, 2007; Blomme, Tromp, & Van Rheede, 2008; Blomme, Van Rheede, & Tromp, 2009). External reasons refer to environmental influences such as the unemployment rate and new job opportunities (Woods & Macaulay, 1989).

Given the well documented causal relationship between turnover intentions and actual behaviors, turnover intention has been widely adopted as a proxy indicator for actual turnover (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Tett & Meyer, 1993; Yang, 2010; Jang & George, 2012; Jung & Yoon, 2013). The difficulty of quantifying actual voluntary employee turnover has prompted researchers to opt for the concept of “turnover intentions” as an alternative.

### ***Turnover Intentions***

Turnover intention may be defined as an employee's intention to leave a job (Kim, Im, & Hwang, 2015). This state of mind commonly arises when employees are negatively disposed to their job positions, when they do not participate actively in their daily work, or when they actually leave their jobs (Jang & George, 2012; Karatepe, 2013). It is important for industry leaders to understand the causes of turnover intentions and to find

potential resolutions. Turnover intentions are sometimes linked to behaviors such as absenteeism, complaints, imputations of responsibility to others, lack of commitment, and job dissatisfaction (Cichy, Cha, & Kim, 2009; Yang, 2010). Such negative characteristics can spread quickly through organizations, thereby causing longer term harm such as lower morale and productivity. Cotton and Tuttle (1986) grouped turnover intentions into three classifications, namely:

- (1) Work-related factors, involving job stress, performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Futrell & Parasuraman, 1984; Sager, Varadarajan, & Futrell, 1988; Sager & Johnston, 1989; Han, Bonn, & Cho, 2016). These have received greatest attention because of their direct and strong effects (Jang & George, 2011).
- (2) Personal factors, including demographic variables such as, age, education, gender, and job tenure (Arnold & Feldman, 1982; Parasuraman & Futrell, 1983; Williams & Hazer, 1986). The relationship between personal factors and turnover intentions is much weaker than is the case for work-related factors (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000).
- (3) External factors, including unemployment rates, employment perceptions, and union presence vary relatively less over the short term (Jang & George, 2011). A recent travel industry study concluded that external factors were the main cause of staff departures amongst all surveyed groups, namely recent hires from graduate school or other industries and newcomers from the same industry (Kim, 2014).

Of the foregoing causes, it is evident that work related factors deserve greatest attention as a basis for addressing employee turnover intentions. This has guided the scoping of the present investigation.

### ***Job Satisfaction***

Job satisfaction is widely recognized as an effective explanation for turnover intentions (Rosse & Hulin, 1985; Eby, Freeman, Rush, & Lance, 1999; Hwang & Kuo, 2006). Employees who express satisfaction with their job are less likely to intend to leave their company (Kim, Im, & Hwang, 2015). In the hospitality and tourism context, substantial evidence supports the negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intentions (Lam, Baum, & Pine, 2001; Bai, Ghiselli, & LaLopa, 2001; Aziz, Goldman, & Olsen, 2007; Karatepe & Uludag, 2007; Yang, 2008; Yang, 2010). In light of such evidence, the present study measures turnover intentions in relation to job satisfaction.

Locke (1969) defined job satisfaction as “the pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one’s job value” (p.316). It is indicative of favorable employee attitudes (Hon, 2013; Madera, Dawson, & Neal, 2013). Job satisfactory has frequently been identified as an antecedent of employee turnover, business performance, organizational commitment and productivity (Mcneese-Smith, 1997; Payne & Huffman, 2005; Schyns & Croon, 2006; Chung, Jung, Kyle, & Petrick, 2010; Yang, 2010; Kim & Brymer, 2011).

As noted by Efraty and Sirgy (1990), job satisfaction is one’s “effective appraisal of various job dimensions”, including the work itself, the quality of leadership, pay and career opportunities (Hancer & George, 2003; Rayton, 2006; Erkutlu, 2008). Porter and

Lawler (1968) divided the drivers of job satisfaction into internal satisfaction factors such as: feeling of achievement, feeling of independence, self-esteem, feeling of control and other similar feelings obtained from work. The relevant external satisfaction factors were: receiving praise from the boss, good relationships with colleagues, good working environment, high salary, good welfare and utilities.

In their empirical study of the job satisfaction of casino hotel employees in Macau, Gu and Siu (2009) indicated that job satisfaction amongst employees in casino hotels is significantly associated with work performance. The researchers identified training opportunities, salaries and support from co-workers as significant drivers for improving job satisfaction in Macau's hospitality and gaming industries. These issues are extended by the researchers in the present study.

### ***Employee Retention Strategies***

Woods and Macaulay (1989) stated that lower turnover can strengthen organizational culture and profitability. In this context it is evident that hospitality and tourism leaders should target their staff retention strategies with care and precision. As suggested by Woods and Macaulay (1989), industry leaders should adopt a strategic emphasis on organizational change and create an organizational culture that appeals to employees. Their longer-term prescriptions for curing excessive turnover include (p. 86):

- (1) Establishing socialization programs to teach employees about organizational values and beliefs.
- (2) Creating training programs.
- (3) Establishing career paths, even for hourly employees.
- (4) Involving employees in decision making.

- (5) Developing partner programs and profit-sharing programs.
- (6) Creating incentive programs.
- (7) Establishing child-care and family-counseling programs.
- (8) Creating work environments that support employees from all perspectives.
- (9) Establishing competitive pay scales.

Yang, Wan and Fu (2012) proposed three categories of retention strategies: human resource management, internal marketing and knowledge retention. Human resource management strategies include intrinsic rewards (Silva, 2006; Kim, Murrmann, & Lee, 2009), training and development (Pizam & Thornburg, 2000; Davidson, Guilding, & Timo, 2006; Deery, 2008; Poulston, 2008; Chalkiti & Carson, 2009), compensation policies (Chiang & Birtch, 2008; Deery, 2008; Cho, Johanson, & Guchait; 2009; Moncarz, Zhao, & Kay, 2009), inter-departmental transfers (Chalkiti & Carson, 2010), selective hiring procedure (Moncarz, Zhao, & Kay, 2009) and mentoring systems (Chalkiti & Carson, 2010). Sun, Aryee, and Law (2007) expressed confidence that these practices would reduce turnover amongst Chinese hotel employees. Internal marketing strategies emphasize satisfying employee needs through education, training and motivation, thereby enabling workers to practice market-oriented behaviors and share in the company's business development objectives (Curry, Wakefield, Price, & Mueller, 1986; George & Gronroos, 1989). Knowledge retention strategies are helpful when it is hard to reduce the turnover rate. In such circumstances, implementing strategies such as knowledge sharing, organizational learning and organizational socialization can effectively minimize the impact of employee turnover on overall organizational performance (Yang, 2007, 2008).



The most controversial retention programs relate to pay and benefit packages, notably in the case of pay scales and profit sharing (Wood & Macaulay, 1989). Jung and Yoon (2015) suggested that employee satisfaction with pay has a significant and positive effect on job engagement, and that dissatisfaction increases their chances of job withdrawal. Career development is also recognized as an essential contributor to minimizing turnover (Woods & Macaulay, 1989; Martin, Mactaggart, & Bowden, 2006). This view is supported by Chiang and Jang (2008) who have suggested that intrinsic motivators, such as the realization of career growth through participation in employee training programs, impact positively on job performance and employee satisfaction.

As illustrated in Figure 2, Macau's six casino operators each provide staff with regulated pay scales and compensation, supplemented by extra reward benefit packages. These are relatively generous by international standards and show awareness about the need to be proactive. Some operators combine profit sharing and pay, whilst others add training. Though training and development is not a replacement for financially oriented incentives, some operators incorporate training and development as a key component of their overall package. The different emphases of the "big six" operators lend themselves to an empirical assessment of how these resonate amongst their targeted employees. The researchers' access to and incorporation of respondents from all of the major operators (ie the total population) in the world's leading gaming related tourism destination enhances the potential value to any emerging insights.

### ***Gender disparity in hospitality and tourism***

Workplaces in the gaming, hospitality and tourism sectors have been characterized by marked gender-based disparities. Most reports have emphasized three aspects: pay

(Cave & Kilic, 2010; Munoz-Bullon, 2009; Skalpe, 2007; Zong, Couch, & Blum, 2011), career advancement (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010; Brownell, 2008; Kara, Uysal, & Magnini, 2012; Mooney & Ryan, 2009; Pinar, McCuddy, Birkan, & Kozak, 2011; Schapp, Stedham, & Yamamura, 2008; Wan & Kong, 2011) and training opportunities (International Labour Organization, 2009; Doyle et al., 2012). Researchers have noted that women who occupy the same positions earn considerably less than their male counterparts (Wan, 2014). This is particularly the case in male-dominated fields such as the gaming industry. In such settings, women are often assigned to take up archetypal female roles and occupations that offer lesser status and lower remuneration. These include cage positions, cocktail servers and dealers (Wan, 2014). The literature shows that female employees in the hospitality and tourism industries generally earn less than their male counterparts (Munoz-Bullon, 2009; Skalpe, 2007; Zong, Couch, & Blum, 2011). Pay inequalities are partially attributable to women's preferred job choices (Munoz-Bullon, 2009). Female workers may prioritize family over work, leading them in turn to choose lower-level positions and to receive lower salaries (Higgins, 2004; Zhao & Ghiselli, 2016).

Women experience greater obstacles to career advancement than men. Regardless of their growing educational attainment and working experience, women are less likely to assume higher level business management positions, are more likely to be assigned to "non-core" departments and may be excluded from continuous career advancement (Wan, 2014). In some cases women opt for lower level roles in order to find a balance between family and work responsibilities. There are compounding factors for women who are involved in more male-dominated gaming occupations (including casino

operations, table games, and slot machines). They may encounter more obstacles to their career advancement than men (Costen, Hardigree, & Testagrossa, 2003).

Reasons that women are offered fewer training and educational opportunities than men may include: sex stereotyping, greater family responsibilities, and lack of assertiveness (Burgess, 2003; International Labour Organization, 2009; Purcell, 1996). In this context, it has been contended that female workers may be more concerned about their current and future financial security, than about training or promotion opportunities. On the basis of the preceding literature review, respondents might be anticipated to exhibit differing receptiveness to programs and that gender disparities may also impact on program preferences.

### **Research Methods**

A questionnaire-based survey was administered to identify how Macau's casino employees perceive the retention programs that are available to them. In conducting the survey, the researchers adopted a convenience sampling approach and note prospective risks of systematic bias. The ultimate research approach was chosen for reasons of speed, cost effectiveness and ease of access to employees across multiple operators that constitute the full competitive set. Questionnaires were distributed to employees from all six casino operators who were attending a casino industry training program organized by a Macau-based higher education institution. The sample is representative of the total population of six major operators. It should however be noted that since the survey respondents were undertaking training, their attitudes to rewards and retention programs may diverge from those attributable to casino employees who are not undergoing such programs. In recognition of this potential limitation, the researchers extended participation by recruiting additional respondents through a snowball sampling approach. Training

program participants were accordingly asked to identify other casino employees who might be willing to be involved. The researchers are confident that the adoption of this approach lowered the prospects of systematic bias.

There is a possibility that common method bias may have skewed the study results, since all of the variable measurements were collected from the same context and in the same manner (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Two precautions were taken to minimize this concern, in line with the recommendations of Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff (2003). Firstly, the researchers sought to diminish potential respondent apprehension about being evaluated through a commitment to anonymity, including the employer's name. This approach reassured respondents that providing honest feedback could not be compromised by the prospect of being traced back to their employer. Secondly, the respondent surveys were supported extensively with secondary sources. The researchers undertook a detailed examination into the retention strategies of the "big six" operators and of relevant published commentaries about their effectiveness. This commitment to understanding the relevant context familiarized the researchers with the prevailing retention practices. Ultimately, though the researchers could not entirely eliminate the prospect of common method bias, the various reliability tests and the researcher evaluations verified that the study results were unaffected.

The researchers collected a final total of 358 completed questionnaires, with three of these revealing missing values. These three were subsequently excluded from the analysis, leading to the retrieval of 355 responses. The high 99.2% response rate provides confidence about the validity of the survey. The various questionnaire items were designed to examine the relative attractiveness of retention programs amongst

respondents. Socio-demographic data were collected, including employer's name, gender, age, tertiary education, and monthly income. Within the employer category, data were transformed to create an ownership variable containing three categories of company, namely Chinese, Western, and Chinese-Western joint ventures. It was hoped that the findings for these different categories would indicate the potential influence of organizational culture. As the dates that have been set for the renewal of the licenses are looming (2020 and 2022), the gaming authorities will evidently look beyond those offering financial viability to those that look after their local workforce. From the perspective of contribution to knowledge, the consideration of Chinese and international business characteristics introduces a cultural dimension which has been absent from most previous studies.

Of the "big six" operators, two have Chinese founders and remain under Chinese ownership - Galaxy Entertainment Group and Sociedade de Jogos de Macau (SJM). The "Western" companies include ventures that are under owners who are based in the West, namely: Venetian Macau (Sands) and Wynn Resorts Macau, which are both owned from the USA. Chinese-Western joint ventures include Melco Resorts and Entertainment and MGM Grand Paradise. The expression 'joint ventures' refers to the contribution of assets in the respective ventures by parties from different countries. Australia is the source country for Melco and the USA is the origin for MGM.

The main study variable is respondent preference for a retention program.

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## Results

The respondent profiles are outlined in Table 1. Male respondents ( $n = 183, p = 51.5\%$ ) slightly exceeded females ( $n = 169, p = 47.6\%$ ). Almost half of the respondents worked for Western companies ( $n = 174, p = 49.0\%$ ). Consistent with the modest levels of formal education prevalent in Macau, most respondents did not hold a tertiary education degree ( $n = 231, p = 65.1\%$ ). The researchers acknowledge that this may have a positive or negative effect on their attitude to educational pursuit. Most respondents were aged 25-34 years ( $n = 222, p = 62.5\%$ ), indicative of a relatively youthful workforce. Over a third have monthly incomes of MOP20,001-30,000 ( $n = 127, p = 35.8\%$ ).

In seeking to establish respondents' receptiveness to development or financial inducements, the researchers conducted a binomial test with a baseline proportion of 50%. Drawing upon the previous literature, the researchers posed questions about the three overall domains, rather than the detail of individual programs offered at each of the "big six". It was not assumed that respondents were aware of the full range of inducements on offer. The findings revealed that participants prefer stock ( $n = 221, p = 62.3\%$ ) over training opportunities ( $n = 134, p = 37.7\%$ ) ( $p < .001$ ). The Pearson chi-square test was used to examine the associations between choice of retention program and socio-demographic variables, including gender, ownership, and education. Since age and monthly personal income are ordinal variables, Gamma correlation was used to assess their associations with choice of retention program. Following this procedure, no significant associations were found for either age (Gamma value = -0.152, ns.) or monthly personal income (Gamma value = -0.005, ns.).

As is shown in Table 2, there is a significant association between the choice of retention program gender and the gender of the respondent ( $\chi^2 (1) = 5.227, p < .05$ ). Specifically, female respondents were more inclined to choose stock than their male counterparts (female: 68.6% versus male: 56.8%). The greater receptiveness of male respondents to training opportunities may indicate their stronger career ambitions, though this conclusion would benefit from some further qualitative assessment.

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**Insert Table 2 here**

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It was found that there is a significant association between the choice of retention program and the ownership of the employing casino ( $\chi^2 (1) = 23.905, p < .01$ ). Respondents who work in Chinese companies or in Chinese-Western joint ventures indicated a stronger propensity to choose stock (Chinese companies: 74.2%; Chinese-Western joint ventures: 74.8%). By contrast, only half of the respondents working in Western companies opted for stock (49.4%). It was found that possession of a tertiary degree is not significantly associated with the choice of retention program ( $\chi^2 (1) = 0.008, ns.$ ). Since age and monthly personal income are ordinal variables, Gamma correlation was used to assess their associations with choice of retention program. No significant associations were found for either age (Gamma value = -0.152, *ns.*) or for monthly income (Gamma value = -0.005, *ns.*).

### **Discussions and Implications**

The researchers evaluated and analyzed employee receptiveness towards casino retention programs in Macau. Since service provision is central to gaming and tourism

operations, the findings highlight key variables that may form a basis for strategic developments that could potentially reduce staff turnover and increase retention.

Of the various retention programs that were evaluated by respondents, financial inducements were perceived to be significantly more appealing than the alternatives. The more favorable respondent attitudes towards financial inducements may reflect concerns such as the shortage of affordable housing in Macau which may have intensified money-related concerns. Since Macau's workforce is predominantly young, it is unsurprising that two thirds of the survey respondents were aged between 25 and 34. The respondents' prevalent stage in the life-cycle suggests that many are likely to have been recently married with awareness of an impetus for savings towards a deposit on a residential property. Financial imperatives may be driving a preference for stocks over professional development and may be endemic to Macau with its land shortage and high population density. Another possible explanation for the preferencing of stocks ( $n = 221$ ,  $p = 62.3\%$ ) over training opportunities ( $n = 134$ ,  $p = 37.7\%$ ) ( $p < .001$ ) by respondents may reflect confidence that the employer provision of training opportunities continues and will still be available when promotional opportunities arise. According to this interpretation, behaviors may be unchanged by the absence of a benefit when there is no withdrawal of its future or ongoing availability. This finding suggests that operators need to exercise subtlety in any messages that they propagate. The various retention strategies and associated messages of the "big six" might benefit from further refinement in the light of fierce inter-organizational competition.

The researchers found that gender disparities impact on the preference that respondents express towards retention program. The roughly equal numbers of male and female



respondents adds legitimacy to the gender related findings. Female respondents had a stronger preference for stocks than their male counterparts (female: 68.6% versus male: 56.8%). This is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Burgess, 2003; Munoz-Bullon, 2009; Purcell, 1996; Zong, Couch, & Blum, 2011). The latter publications concluded that female employees receive fewer training and educational opportunities, emphasize their family responsibilities, and are relatively less assertive. The conclusions of the present Macau study are rather different. Female respondents evidently prioritize financial choices over training and/or promotional opportunities.

As indicated by previous researchers (Woods & Macaulay, 1989), organizational cultures may influence retention decisions. A significant association was found between the ownership of the employing casino and employee preferences for particular retention programs ( $\chi^2(1) = 23.905, p < .01$ ). Respondents who were employed by Chinese companies and Chinese-Western joint ventures had a stronger propensity to choose stock (Chinese companies: 74.2%; Chinese-Western joint ventures: 74.8%). Such differences may be attributable to the prevailing organizational cultures. Chinese operated companies are reputed to have a less overtly “open door” approach and on this basis, may offer less defined career paths to employees than their western counterparts. A surprising finding that is hard to explain was that only about half of those respondents employed by Western companies opted for stock (49.4%). Perhaps the predominantly Macanese/Chinese workforce have greater faith in the financial prospects of the more Chinese owned companies. They may have greater awareness of the reporting of financial performance on nearby stock exchange markets such as Hong Kong, rather than more distant US and Australian performance. Such perceptions merit further investigation.

Interestingly, the attainment of a tertiary education was not significantly associated with the choice of retention program ( $\chi^2 (1) = 0.008$ , ns.). The absence of university degree qualifications amongst two thirds of the respondents reflects the modest formal education that characterizes the broader Macau population and extends to the gaming sector. The responses to the survey appear to be unaffected by a shortage of professional and skilled workers and future researchers may explore the reasons for this.

From a theoretical perspective, the study findings highlight new retention prediction models that may underpin assessments of casino employees' experience of work and their likelihood of staying with the organization. Such employee retention predictive models may include matters identified in previous studies, such as opportunities for advancement, organization commitment and extrinsic rewards (Hausknecht, Rodda, & Howard, 2009). However, it is also noted that more contemporary variables may appeal more to the current generation of casino employees, notably the so-called Millennials. These may be more closely associated with the prevalence of humane and caring approaches and with organizational culture. Additional research is necessary to develop reliable and valid measurement tools for these constructs. Meanwhile the current findings may be usefully extended into other segments of hospitality and tourism such as hallmark events, festivals, and all-inclusive resorts that resemble casino work settings.

### **Limitations and recommendations**

Whilst this research has presented some significant findings, there are a number of limitations. Macau was certainly a suitable study location because the "big six" operators enjoy oligopoly status in a city that accounts for more gaming revenues than any other

location worldwide, including Las Vegas. The capacity to acquire inter-organizational comparisons is meaningful because of the large market shares of each of the companies. However, this strength is also a potential limitation. Even in La Vegas and certainly nowhere else in the world, is there a directly comparable casino and hospitality industry structure. The study findings cannot be readily generalized, despite the expansion of integrated resort casinos in Asian settings such as Singapore and the Philippines. For this reason, the researchers have used the more inclusive expression “hospitality and tourism” in this paper. Data gathering is another potential limitation. Whilst employee participation from all six major operators provides almost universal coverage in the Macau context, the conduct of the initial survey administration during professional development activities may oriented the findings either towards (or possibly away from) respondent preferences for professional development. This limitation was somewhat mitigated by the adoption of a snowballing approach to recruit supplementary respondents. A further limitation is that the researchers did not explore the eligibility of respondents to particular schemes (length of employment might have provided a relevant indicator) and whether such eligibility impacted on their expressed preferences.

The survey findings provide information and insights that should interest both the “big six” operators themselves and also the Macau regulatory authorities. The promotion of in-house training and development by large employers also has implications for other course providers. In some cases, the provision of in-house “Golden Nest Egg” training may compete with offerings by Macau’s network of accredited training and education institutions. However, it may also present opportunities for improved co-ordination and complementarity between more generic and in-house educational provision, especially in

a region (Macau SAR), where qualification rates are low amongst the workforce and where the government wishes to bring about change.

The findings are specific to the Macau labor market and it is noted that mobility across adjacent jurisdictions is constrained. For this reason, the results are most readily applicable to operators within Macau. However, it is noted that Macau is becoming increasingly integrated within the Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macau Greater Bay Area (GHMGBA). This wider region has a population of some 66 million, mostly Cantonese speaking people with increasing interdependencies as a consequence of infrastructural developments and the liberalization of trade and movement. On this basis, it is noted that the staff retention and development activities undertaken by Macau's "big six" are likely to impact on nearby cities such as Hong Kong, Zhuhai and Guangzhou. If, for example, the Macau operators accelerate the inducements offered to current and prospective employees, it will enhance Macau's attractiveness for employment, relative to other GHMGBA cities.

From an academic perspective, this study offers a more developed understanding of employee attitudes towards the inducements that employers extend towards staff retention. Given the rapid expansion of employment in Macau's hospitality and tourism sector, future researchers are advised to adopt a stronger focus on staff attraction strategies, and seek inputs from key stakeholders such as government and senior executives within the "big six".

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