CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

1.1 Basic Introduction

BPO! One reads the word and myriad of well-groomed youth on calls, fast money, and phenomenal lifestyles seem to flash the mind in an instant. That’s just the start. One reads it again, contemplates over it, gets into the unveiled afflictions, and gives it a second thought and a completely differing depiction ignites the mind. Lopsided working hours, unimaginable attrition rate, stress and burnout exhibit its ugly side. No matter how it balances between the pros and cons, the fact remains conspicuous, loud and unchanged. BPO, Business Process Outsourcing, is the mantra of employment, the buzz of present, and the promise of future!

The last decade saw an upheaval in the growth and development of the Indian economy, which was accompanied by the revolution in the technological front and a radical change in the way businesses were done. Instead of being the jack of all trades, the smart organizations have now redefined the way of working and now aim at being the master of their core business. Outsourcing the non-core processes in order to concentrate on the core ones is how the companies prefer to work now. BPO has become the obvious strategic choice of the companies looking at the visible profits of cost reduction while improving the quality of service, increasing shareholder value etc. [1]. With the whirlpool of opportunities the Indian Business Process Outsourcing sector seems to be on a happy ride. It has emerged rapidly, and its exports have grown from $565 million in 2000 to about $7.3 billion in 2005 [2]. With the boat steaming ahead in the global markets, India has already become the most privileged destination. Hence such an eternal inventory of opportunities simply showcases a phenomenon which is no less than the renaissance for our Indian markets.

Today, India is the hottest destination for any company that wants to outsource its business processes. From a negligible size in early 2000 to a gigantic size today, the BPO sector has been growing at an unprecedented rate. In 2003, India accounted for 75 percent of the total BPO offshore delivery value that was expected to increase by 55 percent annually over the next five years [3]. India’s revenue from BPO operations was expected to grow from approximately $1
billion in 2002 to $13.8 billion in 2007 and its share of supply was projected to be 57 percent of the offshore BPO market [4]. According to Nasscom, the Indian IT-BPO industry (including domestic market) recorded an overall growth of 28 per cent (currency adjusted), clocking revenues of $52 billion in FY07-08 up from $39.6 billion in FY06-07. 2008 was a year of revolution for the Indian IT – BPO sector as it began to re-engineer challenges posed by macro-economic environment, with the worldwide spending aggregate expected to reach nearly USD 1.6 trillion, a growth of 5.6 per cent over the previous year. The BPO exports are up by 30 per cent (in US dollars), registering revenues of $10.9 billion [5]. Indian IT-BPO grew by 12 per cent in FY2009 to reach USD 71.7 billion in aggregate revenue. Software and services exports (includes exports of IT services, BPO, Engineering Services and R&D and Software products) reached USD 47 billion, contributing nearly 66 per cent to the overall IT-BPO revenue aggregate. IT-BPO exports (including hardware exports) reached USD 47.3 billion in FY2009 as against USD 40.9 billion in FY2008, a growth of 16 per cent.

Figure 1.1: BPO Revenues from Domestic Sector and Exports from 2000 to 2009
(Source: NASSCOM 2009)

The attractiveness of India as the most favored BPO destination can be contributed to three basic factors-Cost, People and Environment. India ranks first among a host of desirable nations in terms of cost (which includes employee cost, infrastructure cost, management cost and the tax structure). It beats all its competitors on the people front as well. The people factor is evaluated on the lines of size of the job market, workforce education level, language barriers, past
outsourcing experience and employee retention. However, when it comes to environment (which includes country risk, infrastructure, cultural compatibility, proximity etc) India lags behind countries like Canada, Australia and Ireland. Contrary to the sunny side of the story, we have a dark side of the BPO too.

The flip side of the BPOs revolves around the host of challenges that they have been facing since their very inception. The major challenges being faced by the Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) or BPO industry in India can be classified into internal and external challenges. The internal challenges include shortage of competent managers for the middle and senior management and the high attrition rates. The external challenge is in the form of opposition from the US politicians and the UK labor unions against shifting of the BPO operations by local companies to India. The threat of real competition from other players like Philippines also exists, but doesn't seem to need our immediate attention. Let us look at some of these issues.

A speaker at the ITES-BPO Track at Nasscom commented that it is not ITES, but Human Resource Enabled Services (HRES); and this concisely explains the importance and value attached to the 'people' aspect in this service industry [6]. The fact that this industry is still in its nascent stage in India has led to the dearth of experienced middle management level team leaders and senior managers. Entry-level recruitment and employment has not been a problem with so many fresh graduates with good language skills, available readily in the job market. The problem is more intense for the third-party outsourcing companies which have just ventured into this business. They cannot even invest in training, given their financial and other constraints. Captive BPOs like General Electric and American Express, which are established players in the business, have no such problems. They in fact invest substantially in training their managers. However, they have been facing a problem of a different kind. Their middle and senior level managers are being poached by the new entrants to the industry. Reports say that large and established players face an attrition rate of 45% against the industry average of 35%. Everyone agrees that hiring from competition is a cyclical process and will not help the industry grow, but with very few options available, they resort to the easiest solution - poaching.

That brings us to the next issue - high attrition rates. Attrition refers to a gradual, natural reduction in membership or personnel, as through retirement, resignation, or death. It means not
only loss of talent, but also includes the cost of training the new recruits. Of all the challenges posed to BPO organizations at various levels, attrition, absenteeism and motivating employees are the major ones that dominate at the middle level [7]. The attrition rate in the industry has been hovering around 35%, which is quite high for any industry. An average Indian call center employee works with a company for 11 months, whereas an average UK call center employee stays in a company for 3 years. According to some analysts [8], in general, the attrition rate fluctuates between 20% and 40%, while in the best companies, it averages around 15%. As per a report [9], the outsourcing industry would have a shortage of 262,000 professionals by 2012. Despite potential for tremendous growth, BPO industry continues to suffer from high level of attrition stemming from factors like high levels of stress and lack of opportunities for growth. Attrition in BPO, though varying from industry to industry has reached an all-time high level of nearly 60% [8].

![Chart showing rate of attrition in BPOs from 2003 to 2008.](image-url)

Figure 1.2: Rate of Attrition in BPOs (Source: BPO India, NASSCOM)

It is also found that instead of revitalizing the organization, attrition created a phenomenon identified by Leonard Schlesinger and James Heskett as ‘the cycle of failure’ [10]. The cycle involves a chain of consequences beginning with employee dissatisfaction and ending with organizational inefficiency, poor service quality, high customer turnover and decreased profitability. An employee's leaving the organization happens typically in the first couple of weeks of joining. The reasons are many –high stress levels, monotonous nature of the job, demand-supply disparity and lack of career growth potential on the professional front; loss of
identity, mismatch with normal cycle, complete change of life style and lack of comfort on the personal front. Add to this, the 'poaching' strategy being adopted by the players in the industry. Referring to the typical nature of job, much of literature is available which states a BPO job to be monotonous, less skilled, less challenging etc. Some researchers present a number of reasons why BPO work may be less skilled [11] [12] [13]. Indian centers are very large and have been designed to process high volumes of standardized information. Other researchers suggest that it is the ‘high volume, low value, routinized’ work associated with mass production that is most susceptible to outsourcing [2] [12] [14]. Attention is also drawn to other factors present in BPO that add to the picture of routine, de-skilled work [15]. Apart from these reasons many other factors also attribute to attrition.

Attrition in BPOs has terrible effects on the organization. The high attrition costs increases the costs to the organization considerably. The voluntary turnover of desirable employees is generally considered detrimental to the organization both in replacement costs and work disruption [16]. An employee’s intention to leave is an important antecedent to turnover and is a useful criterion because of its negative impact on the well being of the organization [17]. Intent to leave an organization has gained much empirical and theoretical support as an important predictor of turnover [18] [17] [19]. They have to combat the amount of disruption due to unplanned exits. The more the people leave an organization, the more it is a drain on the company’s resources like recruitment expenses, training and orientation resources and the time. The high attrition rate also affects the productivity of the organization. Therefore, it is extremely important to curb attrition not only for an individual firm but also for the industry as a whole. Many researchers have worked enormously on the BPO sector, citing its challenges, issues, and opportunities in and around employee performance, employee satisfaction, employee turnover etc.

1.2 Need of the research

Most research in the BPO sector has addressed only specific problems related to its environmental analysis like challenges, growth and opportunities, the problem of attrition, the HRM systems, and issues of job stress, job satisfaction, individual performance etc. Literature review has also shown how various researchers have identified a plethora of reasons behind the escalating problem of attrition and how many of them have even suggested recommendations to
combat it [20] [21] [22]. Many researchers have also worked on various domains like the HRM systems and practices [2], job satisfaction [23] [24], and burnout prevention [25]. Most of the research on Indian call centres is based upon qualitative approaches involving small numbers of workers [2] [12] [26] [27] [28]. Broader based survey research has been restricted to managerial surveys [15]. Presumably due to the difficulties in gaining research access to BPO, employee voice on a larger scale has been absent from much of the existent literature, although recent work is beginning to address this deficit [29]. The few studies that have canvassed employee perceptions of their work have either relied upon very small samples [26] or upon small numbers of workers spread across a larger number of organizations [2]. Research done in the area of employee motivation and satisfaction has discussed domains like education [23] [30], private public employment [31], financial institutes [32], ITES industry [33], oil industry [34], government ministries [35], labor market [36], to name a few but not much inclusive and structured work has been done in the domain of BPO sector. Thus, no systematic and comprehensive work has been found that collaborates both the facets viz. attrition and retention, and how employee motivation, employee satisfaction, employee involvement can be used to combat the most smoldering problem of the present times i.e. attrition.

There is a dire need of reducing the problem of attrition in the BPO industry of India and ensuring long term retention of employees. A pilot study done on the BPO employees revealed that reasons for leaving a BPO and reasons for staying in a BPO are quite different. Where attrition largely depends on the negative attributes of a BPO job like monotonous nature of job, unusual working hours, dearth of motivation, ineffective supervision etc; retention is all about the intrinsic factors associated with a job like self-esteem, participation, involvement, accountability etc. Tackling the reasons for attrition may help reduce the probability of quitting an organization by employees, but may not actually increase their willingness to sustain in the organization. For these reasons, the need for studying employee attrition and employee retention emerges. There is need to develop a concurrent strategic method, an innovative development paradigm that can be utilized to curb the ever-increasing attrition rate in the BPO industry. Thus the need for this study can be clearly defined in two points. First, attrition is a burning problem for the promising industry of BPO, especially because it fails to tap the full utilization of the human resources and wastes much of its time, money and resources due to this. Second, employee retention must be
managed in such a robust manner that it ensures long term sustenance of employees in a BPO organization.

1.3 Aim of the research

This research aims to explore the dimensions of attrition holistically and produce a model for employee retention. To attain the aim of the research, the Hackman and Oldham’s Job Characteristics model was taken as the basic foundation [37]. Hackman & Oldham (1976) proposed the Job Characteristics Model, which is widely used as a framework to study how particular job characteristics impact on job outcomes, including job satisfaction. The model states that there are five core job characteristics (skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback) which impact three critical psychological states (experienced meaningfulness, experienced responsibility for outcomes, and knowledge of the actual results), in turn influencing work outcomes (job satisfaction, absenteeism, work motivation, etc). The five core job characteristics can be combined to form a motivating potential score (MPS) for a job, which can be used as an index of how likely a job is to affect an employee's attitudes and behaviors and thus his commitment towards an organization. The model has been discussed in detail in chapter 2, section 2.7. The original model has been diagrammatically represented in figure 2.4.

It is proposed that the Job Characteristics model is modified by redefining job dimensions as growth prospects, accountability, sense of accomplishment, self-esteem, job security, interpersonal relationships, working conditions, and by extending organizational outcomes as satisfied, motivated, involved and retained employees. Figure 1.3 is the modified Hackman and Oldham’s Job Characteristics model which has been taken as the base to study the research questions pertaining to this research.

The new model is also designed to be of use as a management tool and must therefore be simple and flexible enough to be of use to the management of an organization. Typical management questions would involve the likely motivational impact of job redesign, such as increasing employees’ level of control and responsibility over their work behavior or introducing a scheme whereby employees participate in certain management decisions. The model should therefore allow managers to
manipulate a host of job characteristics and investigate the likely effects upon the motivation, performance and sustenance of the workforce.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Job Dimensions</th>
<th>Critical Psychological States</th>
<th>Personal and Work Outcomes</th>
<th>Organizational Outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Skill Variety</td>
<td>Experienced meaningfulness of the work</td>
<td>High internal work motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task Identity</td>
<td>Experienced responsibility for outcomes of the work</td>
<td>High quality of work performances</td>
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<td>Task Significance</td>
<td>Knowledge of the actual results of the work</td>
<td>High satisfaction with the work</td>
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<td>Autonomy</td>
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<td>Low absenteeism and turnover</td>
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<td>Feedback</td>
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<td>High Work Motivation</td>
<td>Satisfied Employees</td>
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<td>Accountability</td>
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<td>High Satisfaction with work</td>
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<td>Working Conditions</td>
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Figure 1.3: Modified Hackman and Oldham’s Job Characteristics Model

Based on the Hackman and Oldham’s Job Characteristics Model and the modifications made to it, two separate research models for employee attrition and employee retention have been developed. These two models stand on the supposition that attrition and retention depend on two important
variables. One is the personal characteristics of an employee and the other is the job characteristics. The personal characteristics taken for the study are age, gender, marital status, education and tenure. The job characteristics take for the study have been adopted from Hackman and Oldham’s Job Characteristics Model and include both extrinsic job factors as well as intrinsic factors. More lucid pictorial frameworks of the models are given in Figure 1.4 and 1.5.

![Figure 1.4: Basic model for attrition](image)

Figure 1.4 clearly illustrates the basic constructs of the attrition model: personal characteristics, negative job characteristics (job dimensions), and the final resultant as attrition. It has the personal characteristics as age, education, gender, marital status and tenure along with the negative characteristics of a BPO job i.e. monotonous nature of job, lack of motivation, poor mentoring, power and politics, dissatisfaction with colleagues, low career growth, lack of skill variety, irregular working hours, achievement not recognized etc. These two collectively result in the attrition of employees. The question is how much do these factors actually contribute to attrition.
Figure 1.5: Basic model for retention

Figure 1.5 illustrates constructs of retention model i.e. personal characteristics, intrinsic job dimensions and the resulting level of satisfaction, motivation and involvement (work outcomes) and the final result i.e. retained employees (organizational outcomes). It describes the personal characteristics as age, gender, education, marital status, and tenure and core job dimensions which are intrinsic in nature like self-esteem, participation, accountability, growth prospects, feeling of accomplishment, prestige inside and outside, interpersonal relationships, working conditions, involvement, job security, amenities, authority etc and how do they contribute to retention of employees.
1.4 Objectives of the study

The major motivation of this thesis is derived from several studies [1] [2] [7] [20]. It is clear from the review of earlier research that solutions are required to some specific problems of practical importance in the field of escalating attrition in BPOs. The broad objective of this thesis is to identify the root causes of attrition in BPOs, analyzing the level of employee motivation, satisfaction and involvement, generate a model for maximizing sustenance of employees in the organization and come up with concrete recommendations, which will eventually be valuable to the organizations to retain their employees for a long term. The specific objectives of this thesis are:

1. To identify and rank the factors of attrition in BPOs based on secondary data.

2. To explore and analyze the dimensions of attrition in BPOs based on primary data collected from field survey.

3. To identify and explore the dimensions of employee retention in BPOs based on primary data collected from field survey.

4. To develop a regression model for escalating the stay of employees in BPOs and give recommendations based on the model.

5. To assess the existing level of employee motivation and validate the model by studying the impact of recommendations on a small patch.

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the objectives set for the research, a set of research questions were formulated. These questions are nothing but translation of objectives into questions, so as to gather the required data from the respondents. The study was done in two components. First was precisely the identification and exploration of the causal agents of attrition in the BPO sector of India. This involved an exhaustive study of the personal characteristics of the respondents; exploring the factors behind attrition, and then comparing these factors across the various personal characteristics. Second was the identification and exploration of the factors of retention in the BPO sector of India. This involved detecting the factors through field survey; comparing them across the personal characteristics; and developing a regression model. It was concluded by model validation i.e. studying the impact of the recommendations on
employees’ willingness to stay and analysis of the perceived attitudes of the employees. This included assessing the levels of employee motivation, employee satisfaction, employee involvement, and life interest and work compatibility among the employees before and after the recommendations; and the relationship between the perceived attitudes and employees’ willingness to stay. With this two-dimensional purpose of the study the following research questions were addressed:

**Research Questions**

**PART 1: Exploring employee attrition in BPOs**

1. What are the factors responsible for attrition in the BPO industry?

2. How much do the dimensions of attrition vary across the personal characteristics of the respondents?

3. How much do these factors contribute to employee attrition in the BPOs?

**PART II: Exploring employee retention in BPOs**

4. What are the factors that lead to employee retention in the BPO industry?

5. How much do the dimensions of retention vary across the personal characteristics of the respondents?
6. How much do these dimensions of retention contribute to an employee’s willingness to stay in the same organization?

7. What is the impact of the recommendations on employees’ willingness to stay in the organization?

8. What is the mean level of the perceived attitudes i.e. employee satisfaction, employee motivation, employee involvement and life interest and work compatibility among the BPO employees before and after the implementation of recommendations?

1.6 Research Methodology

The general intent of this exploratory and descriptive study was twofold. Therefore, a systematic and organized methodology was obtained for the research study. First and foremost a pilot study was done on 100 BPO employees to understand the fundamentals of employee attrition and retention. Based on the findings of the pilot study, the objectives were chalked out. A survey design was used to obtain the set objectives. The study aimed at employees working in the urban centric BPOs i.e. the BPOs operating in tier-I cities. Bangalore, NCR, and Mumbai are Tier I cities, that are leading ITES cities in India and NCR was chosen as the region for this study. A sample size of 500 was taken and simple random sampling technique was used to gather data from the low and middle level employees, where attrition is highest. In a simple random sample of a given size, all such subsets of the frame are given an equal probability. This minimizes bias and simplifies analysis of results. In particular, the variance between individual results within the sample is a good indicator of variance in the overall population, which makes it relatively easy to estimate the accuracy of results.

A questionnaire was intricately designed to tap the demographic variables including age, education, gender, marital status, and tenure of the respondents. It also gathered information about the factors responsible for attrition, the factors that can be employed to retain the employees in a BPO, their overall level of satisfaction, motivation, involvement and life interest and work compatibility. Besides gathering data through questionnaire, telephonic interviews were also done with the respondents to accentuate the data collected. Main data collection began in the month of July 2008. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0 was religiously used for the statistical analyses.
1.7 Significance of the Study

The significance of the study lies in the detonation of the BPO industry in the recent years. Where on one hand the sector is growing with leaps and bounds, on the other the employee turnover has been alarmingly high, thus costing a lot to the company. The middle level and low level employees are victims of dearth of motivation and employee satisfaction also seems to be brandishing. The study is an attempt to assess the patterns of attrition in BPO and analyze the relationship among employee motivation, job satisfaction and employee retention, so as to utilize employee motivation to retain employees in an organization. Thus, not only is it significant for academicians but also for professionals who can exploit it to control the employee turnover.

1.8 Scope of the study

This study has been designed as a study employing quantitative methodology with a sample confined to BPO employees in India. On the strong side of our study lies the fact that the whole population of urban centric BPO firms operating in the country has been covered and a random sample of employees has been selected. All tier-I cities of BPO have been picked for the study and ten BPOs are randomly selected through lottery method for data collection. However, it is not possible to build a one-to-one rapport with all the employees. Thus, a limited sample of 500 respondents has been chosen for the research and a detailed study has been done. Moreover, only selected facets of job characteristics have been considered for the study. There are many which can be included in order to assess employee attrition and employee retention in a BPO organization. Therefore, the scope of the study is limited to the sample size and also to the selected dimensions of personal and job characteristics.

1.9 Organization of the thesis

The work presented in this thesis focuses on the smoldering issue of attrition in the BPO industry; how it can be minimized and how employee can be retained and their stay be maximized. The level of motivation, satisfaction, involvement and life interest and work compatibility of the employees has a positive effect on the sustenance of the employees and this has been statistically proven in the work done. The results obtained are encouraging. The study has been organized in seven chapters. A brief outline of the various chapters is as follows:
Chapter 1 is a prologue to the thesis. It establishes the foreword about the BPO industry, the prevailing issue of attrition in the sector, the urgent need of combating it, and the ways to enhance retention. It underlines the significance of the study and also emphasizes on the source of motivation for the present work. The chapter throws light on the various research questions that have been addressed in the thesis and clearly delineates the objectives.

Chapter 2 is enriched with an exhaustive and comprehensive literature review of the subject. It illustrates about the research work taking place globally with reference to BPOs, attrition, employee motivation and employee involvement. It begins with a detailed description of the Indian BPO industry, briefing on the Indian BPO segments, its benefits, its market size, its growth and its SWOT analysis. It then brings to light the issue of attrition prevailing in this sector and its present figures. The chapter then unfolds the basic concepts of motivation and involvement and discusses the various established theories and research work done in this arena worldwide. It also talks about the Hackman and Oldham’s Job Characteristics Model and discusses the conceptual framework of the two models designed for this study.

Chapter 3 deals with the overall methodology of the research work. The chapter commences with the details of the pilot study and its findings. It then moves on to the research methodology of the main study. In order to validate the findings of literature review, a survey was conducted among the low level and middle level employees of Indian BPO firms. An instrument was developed to facilitate systematic data collection in this study. The chapter elucidates the instrumentation adopted and the participants chosen for the study. It describes the variables that form the skeleton of the research questions and vividly explains the questionnaire designed for data collection. It then also hits on the validity of the instrument and talks about the statistical analyses done for each of the research question.

Chapter 4 deals with the detailed findings and analysis of objective 1 and 2 i.e. identification and exploration of the dimensions of employee attrition in the BPO industry through secondary and primary data. A study was done on attrition in the BPOs based on secondary data. Weighted average method was used to rank the factors responsible for attrition. Reviewing the earlier researches, the main causal agents responsible for high attrition in the BPO industry were identified and ranked and as a conclusion it was found that there is a vicious circle of attrition in BPO industry because ‘Low Perceived Value’ drives employees to quit and quitting by the employees further lowers down the
perceived value. One of the driving reasons behind attrition was dearth of motivation. This chapter also describes the findings of the second objective. It identifies the causal agents of attrition in the BPO industry through primary data collected from field survey. It reveals the personal profile of the respondents and then talks about the factors clubbed through factor analysis. It then compares the dimensions of attrition across the various personal characteristics. Finally, it conducts a regression analysis and shows how much does each factor contribute to the attrition in the BPOs.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the remaining three objectives i.e. identification and exploration of dimensions of retention, working out on a regression model for retention and validation of the proposed model. The chapter identifies the factors for employee retention; compares them across the personal characteristics; and correlates them with the employees’ willingness to stay. It then describes the findings of the regression analysis to find out the contribution of each of the factors to an employees’ willingness to stay. The chapter discusses an interesting matrix based on the findings of the study. The third section of the chapter is model validation, where in a patch test is done on a small sample of 50 respondents in order to validate the result. It talks about the result of the implementation of recommendations and its implication. It analyses the perceived attitudes of the employees, i.e. employee motivation, employee satisfaction, employee involvement and work compatibility before and after the recommendations and also unfurls the relationship of these perceived attitudes with their personal characteristics and their willingness to stay in the company.

Chapter 6 is devoted to conclusions and recommendations. This chapter also discusses the limitations and scope for further research in the area of employee motivation and retention.