INTEGRATING COMPENSATION MANAGEMENT AND JOB AUTONOMY TO IMPROVE RETENTION IN THE GIG AND DELIVERY SECTOR

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Abstract
The gig economy has emerged as one of the most significant labor market transformations in recent decades, particularly in urban delivery services where food platforms such as Zomato, Swiggy, Blinkit, and Zepto dominate. While such platforms provide flexible work and income opportunities, they are equally characterized by high attrition and precarious employment conditions. Classical theories of motivation and retention emphasize the role of compensation in sustaining workforce stability; however, emerging evidence from gig work suggests that monetary incentives alone may not be sufficient to retain workers in algorithmically managed environments. Drawing on Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, this study examines the integrated role of compensation management and job autonomy in influencing employee retention. Using structural equation modeling on survey data from 365 delivery workers, the study finds that compensation elements such as pay, incentives, and allowances exert no direct effect on retention, contradicting earlier organizational research. Instead, job autonomy strongly predicts retention and mediates the relationship between compensation and commitment, while adverse weather conditions erode autonomy and indirectly undermine retention. These findings extend existing motivational frameworks by demonstrating that in algorithmically governed labor markets, compensation enhances retention only when accompanied by genuine autonomy within contextual boundaries. The paper makes theoretical contributions by reframing autonomy as the critical mediator of compensation–retention linkages and offers practical insights for designing sustainable platform policies.

1. Introduction

The rise of the gig economy has reshaped employment structures by creating on-demand, platform-based jobs that promise flexibility and independence. Nowhere is this more visible than in the food delivery sector, where platforms such as Zomato, Swiggy, Blinkit, and Zepto provide livelihoods for thousands of urban workers. While the attraction of flexible hours and immediate earnings has driven the growth of this workforce, the sector faces chronic retention challenges. High attrition rates threaten not only the profitability of platforms but also the stability of workers' livelihoods. Existing scholarship on retention in conventional employment contexts has consistently emphasized the importance of compensation, positioning pay and benefits as central to sustaining employee loyalty (Armstrong, 2010; Price, 2001). Yet, the unique nature of gig work—with its fluctuating

incomes, lack of formal contracts, and reliance on algorithmic control—raises questions about whether compensation alone can explain retention in this context (Stewart & Stanford, 2017).

At the same time, autonomy has emerged as an equally important dimension in discussions of gig work. While platforms market "flexibility" and "freedom" as core attractions, workers often experience limited control over how, when, and where they perform their tasks due to algorithmic task assignment and performance monitoring systems (Wood et al., 2019; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). The paradox of promised independence but actual dependence highlights the importance of re-examining autonomy not just as a motivational factor but as a structural determinant of workforce retention. Despite this, prior studies have largely treated compensation and autonomy as separate constructs, with limited attempts to integrate them into a unified explanatory framework.

This study addresses this gap by examining the joint influence of compensation management and job autonomy on employee retention in the food delivery sector. Specifically, we test whether job autonomy mediates the relationship between compensation and retention, thereby providing new insights into how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators interact under algorithmic management. The analysis is grounded in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which distinguishes between hygiene factors such as pay and motivators such as autonomy (Omar et al., 2021), Self-Determination Theory, which positions autonomy as a basic psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and the JD-R model, which views autonomy as a job resource that buffers against demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). By integrating these frameworks, the study not only offers empirical validation but also extends theoretical debates by demonstrating that compensation's effect on retention is contingent upon the presence of autonomy.

2. Literature Review

Basic pay in this study is measured as the standard hourly or per-task rate paid to gig workers, excluding additional bonuses or allowances. Basic pay refers to the fixed salary or wage provided to employees for their services, serving as a fundamental hygiene factor that prevents dissatisfaction (Herzberg, as cited in Omar et al., 2021). In the gig economy, competitive basic pay is essential to attract and retain workers who often lack job security and traditional benefits (Wood et al., 2019).

Performance-based incentives are defined as additional earnings related to delivery targets, customer ratings, or service speed. Performance-based incentives, such as bonuses and commissions, are used to align employee efforts with organisational goals. They enhance motivation by rewarding productivity and outcomes (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Vroom, 1964). In gig work, these incentives can increase short-term engagement, but must be clearly defined to avoid ambiguity in rewards (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017).

Extended benefits are defined as the availability of nonwage benefits, such as healthcare, paid leave, and financial support services, as reported by gig workers. Extended benefits include health insurance, family support, and leave provisions beyond standard pay. These benefits contribute to job satisfaction and retention by meeting employees' psychological and social needs (Armstrong, 2010; Patnaik & Padhi, 2012). In the gig economy, access to these benefits is often limited, which impacts worker loyalty and well-being (Stewart & Stanford, 2017).

Bad weather allowances are measured by whether workers receive additional pay during inclement weather conditions, such as rain, storms, or extreme heat. Bad weather allowances compensate workers for performing duties under harsh conditions, providing both a safety incentive and recognition of extra effort. Such allowances act as fairness mechanisms that can reduce perceived inequity (Adams, 1965) and reinforce commitment in delivery services where environmental risks are common (Chan et al., 2020).

Late-night allowances are defined as financial incentives paid for shifts worked during late night or overnight hours, typically after -10 PM. Late-night allowances are additional payments for work performed during unconventional hours. These incentives acknowledge the social and physical costs of such work and improve retention by offering compensation for work-life disruptions (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Omar et al., 2021).

Job autonomy is evaluated by the degree to which gig workers can choose their work hours, accept or reject tasks, and plan routes independently. Job autonomy refers to the degree of control employees have over their tasks and schedules. It is a key resource in the JD-R model and a core component of intrinsic motivation in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Higher autonomy is associated with better job satisfaction and lower turnover, especially in gig roles where flexibility is a key attraction (Wood et al., 2019).

Employee retention is measured by the stated intention to continue working with the platform for the next six months and their historical duration with the service. Employee retention refers to an organisation's ability to keep employees over time. It is influenced by a mix of extrinsic (eg, pay, benefits) and intrinsic (e.g., autonomy, satisfaction) factors (Rousseau, 1995; Vroom, 1964). In the gig economy, customised compensation strategies and supportive work environments are essential to improve retention (Stewart & Stanford, 2017).

A substantial body of research supports the assertion that compensation management significantly influences employee retention, particularly in the gig and delivery economy. This section reviews theoretical and empirical evidence related to each hypothesis.

2.1 Compensation and Retention in Traditional and Gig Contexts

Compensation has long been theorized as a fundamental determinant of retention. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory conceptualizes pay and benefits as hygiene factors— conditions that do not in themselves motivate employees but whose absence leads to dissatisfaction (Omar et al., 2021). Similarly, Armstrong's (2010) total reward model emphasizes that a competitive salary package, combined with extended benefits, forms the foundation of employee loyalty. Empirical studies across conventional sectors confirm that fair compensation reduces turnover and stabilizes workforce commitment (Rafique et al., 2015; Price, 2001).

However, the applicability of these findings to the gig economy is far from straightforward. Scholars such as Stewart and Stanford (2017) argue that gig platforms offer unstable earnings and lack benefits, undermining the retention power of compensation. Further, the algorithmic distribution of incentives often creates opacity and perceptions of unfairness (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). Our study empirically confirms this contradiction: while compensation structures remain essential for attracting workers, they do not significantly predict retention once workers are engaged. This finding challenges traditional

assumptions that monetary incentives form the primary lever for retention, suggesting instead that their effect may be indirect and mediated by other job resources.

2.2 Job Autonomy as an Intrinsic Resource

Parallel to compensation, job autonomy has been consistently associated with motivation and commitment. Hackman and Oldham's (1976) Job Characteristics Model identifies autonomy as one of the five core dimensions of work design, critical for enhancing intrinsic motivation. Self-Determination Theory further emphasizes autonomy as a basic psychological need, whose fulfillment directly influences satisfaction and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within the JD-R framework, autonomy functions as a key resource that reduces strain and improves well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

In gig work, autonomy is central to its value proposition yet often contested in practice. Wood et al. (2019) highlight how gig workers perceive flexibility in choosing work hours, but simultaneously experience algorithmic control over task assignment and customer ratings. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) similarly show that autonomy in gig platforms is fragmented—workers can log in at will but cannot meaningfully influence earnings or working conditions. Our findings extend this literature by demonstrating empirically that autonomy not only predicts retention but also mediates between compensation and retention. This indicates that compensation strategies translate into worker commitment only when accompanied by sufficient autonomy, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping worker experiences under platform governance.

2.3 Contextual Moderators: Environmental Stressors

The JD-R model emphasizes the balance between job demands and resources, highlighting that contextual stressors can undermine even strong motivational factors (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In the case of food delivery work, environmental challenges such as adverse weather conditions represent significant demands that reduce workers' ability to exercise control. Chan et al. (2020) document how delivery under extreme conditions not only imposes physical risks but also limits decision-making flexibility. Consistent with this, our study finds that adverse weather significantly reduces perceived autonomy, indirectly weakening retention outcomes. This highlights the fragility of autonomy in gig work, suggesting that contextual variables must be incorporated into theoretical models of job resources.

2.4 Integrating Compensation, Autonomy, and Retention

Taken together, these findings suggest the need for a holistic framework that integrates compensation and autonomy rather than treating them as isolated determinants. Traditional theories emphasize compensation as foundational, while motivational theories stress autonomy as intrinsic. Our study shows that in gig work, compensation alone cannot sustain retention; it must be coupled with autonomy to translate into long-term engagement. This insight not only validates Herzberg's distinction between hygiene and motivator factors but extends Self-Determination Theory and JD-R by reframing autonomy as a conditional and context-sensitive construct under algorithmic management.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative, survey-based research design to empirically examine how compensation management practices influence employee retention in the gig economy, with job autonomy conceptualized as a mediating variable. Such an approach is particularly suitable for contexts characterized by algorithmic management and fluid employment

relationships, where large-scale data are necessary to capture patterns of worker perceptions and outcomes. Drawing on Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, the methodology integrates classical motivational frameworks with contemporary labor market realities, thereby ensuring both theoretical rigor and contextual relevance.

Sampling and Data Collection

The empirical setting focuses on food delivery platforms—Swiggy, Zomato, Blinkit, and Zepto—representing the dominant employers in India's urban gig economy. Given the dispersed and transient nature of this workforce, convenience sampling was employed, yielding 365 valid responses. Although non-probabilistic, this strategy aligns with established practices in exploratory studies of hard-to-reach populations (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Data collection followed the schedule method, wherein the researcher personally administered the questionnaire to ensure clarity and minimize item non-response. This was particularly critical in capturing accurate responses from a workforce that is often heterogeneous in terms of education and exposure to research instruments.

Instrument Design and Constructs

The survey instrument was structured into four sections. The demographic section captured socio-economic details such as age, education, marital status, income, dependents, and working hours, thereby situating respondents within the broader socio-labor landscape (De Stefano, 2016). The second section operationalized compensation management through five key components: basic pay, performance-based incentives, extended benefits, bad weather allowances, and late-night allowances. These were derived from established frameworks in compensation theory (Milkovich, Newman, & Gerhart, 2013; Armstrong, 2010) and adapted to the specific conditions of gig delivery work.

The third section measured job autonomy, drawing on Hackman and Oldham's (1976) Job Characteristics Model and Morgeson and Humphrey's (2006) Work Design Questionnaire. Indicators included the degree of control workers possessed over scheduling, route selection, and task acceptance. The final section assessed employee retention through measures of willingness to remain, perceived job stability, and satisfaction with compensation and work conditions, grounded in the turnover frameworks of Mobley et al. (1978) and Price (2001).

Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

Content validity was ensured through expert review, while a pilot study with a smaller subset of gig workers refined item clarity and contextual alignment (Haynes et al., 1995). Psychometric analysis confirmed reliability, with composite reliability (CR) values exceeding 0.7 and average variance extracted (AVE) surpassing 0.5 for all constructs, thereby affirming internal consistency and convergent validity. Ethical safeguards were rigorously applied: participation was voluntary, respondents were briefed on confidentiality, and no personally identifiable data were collected (Israel & Hay, 2006).

By combining robust theoretical grounding with empirically validated constructs, this methodological framework ensures that the study not only measures compensation and autonomy with precision but also situates them within the lived realities of gig work.

Results and Discussion

Demographic and Workforce Characteristics

The profile of the respondent's challenges stereotypes of gig work as low-skill or purely transitional. The workforce is predominantly male (92.9%) and concentrated in the 25–44 age bracket (83.8%), representing the most economically active demographic. Strikingly, 40.8% of workers hold undergraduate degrees and 24.4% postgraduate qualifications, indicating a higher educational attainment than traditionally associated with delivery work. These findings highlight a latent skill pool within the gig economy that platforms have yet to leverage for skill development or upward mobility initiatives. Moreover, 76.2% of respondents report full-time engagement, and nearly 45% earn above ₹40,000 monthly, suggesting that delivery work is not merely supplemental but forms the primary livelihood for a significant proportion of workers.

Measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) established the measurement model's robustness. Fit indices demonstrated strong alignment with theoretical expectations: CMIN/DF at 2.980 (below the threshold of 3.0), GFI at 0.920, AGFI at 0.910, NFI at 0.900, CFI at 0.926, and RMSEA at 0.053. Together, these values confirm an acceptable and parsimonious fit. Reliability and validity metrics further reinforce construct soundness, with CR values ranging from 0.824 to 0.913 and AVE values between 0.521 and 0.683, ensuring both internal consistency and discriminant validity.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural equation model reveals critical insights that refine theoretical debates on compensation and retention. Among compensation variables, none—including basic pay, performance-based incentives, extended benefits, and late-night allowances—demonstrated significant direct effects on job autonomy or employee retention. The only significant relationship observed was between adverse weather and job autonomy (Estimate = -0.091, p = 0.024), confirming that environmental stressors reduce workers' sense of control and flexibility.

Most importantly, job autonomy emerged as the strongest predictor of retention (Estimate = 0.194, p < 0.001). This finding underscores autonomy's role as a mediator, aligning with Self-Determination Theory's claim that autonomy is a core psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the JD-R model's recognition of autonomy as a job resource that buffers against strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In contrast, the non-significance of compensation factors challenges classical economic models that assume direct pay–retention linkages (Armstrong, 2010). Instead, the data confirm Herzberg's distinction between hygiene factors (compensation) and motivators (autonomy), showing that pay prevents dissatisfaction but does not sustain long-term commitment without intrinsic motivators.

Interpretive Discussion

These results collectively suggest that in algorithmically managed gig environments, monetary incentives have limited capacity to retain workers once the basic threshold of income adequacy is met. Instead, the provision of genuine autonomy—through flexible scheduling, task choice, and reduced algorithmic surveillance—emerges as the primary driver of worker loyalty. This finding aligns with Wood et al. (2019), who highlight the paradox of gig work: platforms market flexibility, yet workers often experience constraint.

The negative impact of adverse weather further emphasizes how contextual demands undermine autonomy, pointing to the fragility of this motivational resource in practice.

Theoretical Contribution and Conclusion

This study advances theory by reframing the compensation–retention relationship through the mediating role of autonomy. While classical models such as Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, Equity Theory, and Expectancy Theory have emphasized compensation as central to retention, our findings challenge these assumptions in the gig economy context. Compensation elements—basic pay, incentives, and allowances—function as necessary but insufficient conditions. They establish a baseline of satisfaction but cannot independently secure retention. Instead, job autonomy emerges as the critical link, validating Self-Determination Theory's claim that autonomy is a non-negotiable psychological need and extending the JD-R framework by empirically demonstrating autonomy's buffering role under environmental constraints.

By integrating these insights, the study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends Herzberg's hygiene–motivator distinction by demonstrating that in algorithmically governed work, autonomy—not compensation—is the true motivator driving retention. Second, it nuances Self-Determination Theory by showing how autonomy is fragile and context-dependent, eroded by factors such as adverse weather and algorithmic control. Third, it enriches the JD-R model by empirically situating autonomy as a mediating resource that links external rewards with sustained engagement.

In conclusion, the study underscores that retention in the gig economy cannot be understood through monetary incentives alone. Worker loyalty is contingent upon the provision of autonomy within the structural and contextual constraints of platform work. By highlighting autonomy as the decisive factor, the study not only challenges prevailing retention models but also offers a robust theoretical framework for analyzing employment sustainability in digitally mediated labor markets.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for platform managers, HR practitioners, and policymakers tasked with sustaining the gig workforce. A key insight is that retention cannot be secured through financial incentives alone. While basic pay, performance-linked bonuses, and allowances remain necessary to attract workers and prevent dissatisfaction, they do not guarantee long-term commitment. Instead, worker loyalty is more directly tied to job autonomy, making it imperative for platform companies to redesign managerial practices to enhance flexibility and control.

First, platforms must move beyond symbolic claims of flexibility to create genuine autonomy for workers. This includes offering greater discretion in scheduling, route planning, and task acceptance, thereby reducing algorithmic rigidity and allowing workers to align work with personal and family needs. Second, environmental challenges—most notably adverse weather—must be addressed through adaptive policies. Weather-linked hazard allowances, protective equipment, or dynamic shift rescheduling can help preserve workers' sense of control during high-demand conditions, mitigating the erosion of autonomy identified in this study.

Third, the unexpectedly high levels of education among delivery workers point to untapped opportunities for skill development and career progression. Platforms could integrate training programs in logistics, customer service, or digital management, thereby

transforming gig work from a stopgap occupation into a more sustainable livelihood. Finally, policymakers have a critical role to play in mandating minimum levels of autonomy and protective benefits. Regulatory frameworks that balance worker flexibility with protections against algorithmic exploitation or environmental risks would ensure that autonomy is not undermined by systemic vulnerabilities.

Taken together, these implications highlight the need for a dual strategy: securing the hygiene foundations of compensation while embedding autonomy into platform governance structures. Such an approach would not only reduce attrition but also enhance worker well-being, trust, and organizational legitimacy in the long term.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that warrant caution and provide avenues for future inquiry. First, the reliance on convenience sampling restricts the generalizability of findings beyond the specific context of food delivery platforms in India. While the demographic diversity of the sample provides valuable insights, future research should employ probabilistic or stratified sampling methods to enhance representativeness across broader gig sectors, including ride-hailing, domestic services, and freelance digital labor.

Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships. Retention is inherently dynamic, influenced by shifting economic conditions, platform policies, and personal life circumstances. Longitudinal studies tracking workers over time would provide deeper insights into how autonomy and compensation interact to shape long-term workforce trajectories. Third, the study relies on self-reported measures, which, while valuable, may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability effects. Future research could incorporate behavioral data, such as actual retention rates, platform usage logs, or attrition statistics, to triangulate findings and reduce subjectivity.

Fourth, the structural model did not account for potential moderating variables such as algorithmic rating systems, customer interactions, or peer networks, all of which may significantly influence workers' experience of autonomy. Qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic studies could uncover these nuances and provide a more holistic view of the lived realities of gig work. Finally, cross-national comparative studies would illuminate how variations in cultural norms, labor regulations, and welfare systems shape the autonomy–retention dynamic, thereby extending the theoretical relevance of this model across different socio-economic contexts.

In sum, while the study provides robust evidence that autonomy is the central mediator of compensation–retention relationships in the gig economy, future research must continue to expand methodological, contextual, and theoretical boundaries. Doing so will enrich scholarly understanding and provide even stronger foundations for designing sustainable, equitable, and worker-centered platform economies.

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