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Repositioning Sustainable Organisational Practices as a Strategic Imperative for Employee Retention in Nigerian Professional Service Firms

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Abstract

Nigerian professional service firms operate in one of the most competitive talent markets in the world, in which skilled professionals are pursued both by rival firms and by the pull of international migration. Sustainable organisational practices are widely promoted as a retention lever, yet evidence from the sector suggests that their retention value is being lost in translation. Drawing on survey data from a leading professional service firm in Lagos, this paper argues that the failure is not one of policy but of positioning. In the case examined, management commitment to sustainability was near-universally recognised (92.4 per cent) and policy was comprehensively documented (95.9 per cent), yet only 27.5 per cent of employees felt informed about sustainability goals and only around three in ten regarded wellbeing and work-life initiatives as reasons to stay. Fair and ethical treatment, experienced directly rather than communicated through policy, was the strongest retention anchor (60.3 per cent). The paper contends that sustainable organisational practices remain treated as a compliance and reputational activity rather than a strategic instrument of talent retention, and it sets out a framework for repositioning them: closing the communication gap, making resource investment visible, standardising practice across departments, embedding wellbeing as a design objective, and building on fairness as the sector's most credible retention foundation. The argument is directed at human resource leaders and executives in Nigerian professional services, and at policymakers concerned with skilled-labour retention.

Keywords: sustainable organisational practices; employee retention; professional services; strategic human resource management; Nigeria; talent management

1. The Retention Problem in Nigerian Professional Services

Professional service firms are, in the most literal sense, their people. Their value is produced by the expertise, judgement and client relationships that individual professionals carry with them, which makes the retention of talent not a support function but a core strategic concern. When a senior professional leaves, the firm loses not only a salaried role but a portion of its institutional knowledge, its client continuity and its capacity to compete (Sugiono & Beniawan, 2023). In Nigeria this concern is sharpened by conditions largely outside any single firm's control. A volatile labour market, uneven welfare structures and constrained career mobility combine with a powerful emigration pull that draws skilled professionals towards opportunities abroad (Onyeonoru, 2020; Ogueyungbo & Akinlabi, 2022).

Against this backdrop, firms have reached for sustainable organisational practices as a means of anchoring talent. These practices bundle environmental, social and governance commitments with the human sustainability agenda of fair pay, ethical leadership, work-life balance and employee voice (Rahman, Abd Wahab, & Abdul Latiff, 2022; Aust, Westerman, & Cooke, 2020). The expectation, grounded in social exchange and organisational support theory, is that employees who perceive responsible treatment will reciprocate with loyalty and reduced intention to leave (Guerci, Longo, & Gianecchini, 2023; Karatepe, Hsieh, & Aboramadan, 2022). The expectation is reasonable. The problem is that, in practice, it is not being realised, and understanding why is the purpose of this paper.

2. The Conditional Nature of the Sustainability-Retention Link

The empirical literature on sustainable practices and retention is more conditional than its popular framing suggests. Meta-analytic and review evidence indicates that sustainable and green HRM practices are associated with lower turnover intention, but that the association is typically indirect, running through job satisfaction, organisational commitment and perceived support rather than acting directly (Yang, Li, & Liu, 2022; Kundi & Rehman, 2023). This matters because indirect effects are fragile. Each link in the chain is a point at which the effect can be lost. If employees do not perceive a practice, or do not attribute it to the organisation, or do not connect it to their own experience, the psychological mechanism never engages and the retention benefit never materialises.

A recurring qualification in this body of work is that the existence of a policy is not the same as its effect. Studies of work-life and wellbeing provisions have found that formally adopting such policies does not reliably improve outcomes unless implementation is consistent and visible throughout the organisation (Park, Lee, & Kim, 2020). The retention promise of sustainability, in other words, is contingent on delivery. It is precisely this contingency that firms tend to overlook when they treat the adoption of a policy as the completion of a task.

3. Evidence of an Implementation-Experience Gap

Survey evidence from a leading professional service firm in Lagos illustrates the contingency in concrete terms. Among 171 employees, the top-level markers of sustainability were close to exemplary. Management support for and enforcement of sustainability policies drew 92.4 per cent agreement with no dissent, and the existence of clearly documented policies was acknowledged by 95.9 per cent. On these measures the firm would appear to be a model of sustainable practice.

The picture inverts as soon as the measurement moves to the level of the individual employee. Only 27.5 per cent felt adequately informed about the organisation's sustainability goals, and 35.1 per cent

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regarded the resources committed to implementation as inadequate. When employees were asked whether specific practices gave them reason to stay, wellbeing commitment (31.6 per cent) and work-life balance support (31.0 per cent) were the weakest anchors of all, each rejected by roughly two-thirds of respondents. Consistent with the conditional literature, the practices that were documented and endorsed at the top did not register as retention factors at the bottom.

Indicator	Level	Reading
Management commitment recognised	92.4%	Strong at the top
Documented policies acknowledged	95.9%	Strong on paper
Employees informed of goals	27.5%	Weak in delivery
Resource investment seen as adequate	64.9%	Contested
Wellbeing seen as reason to stay	31.6%	Weak retention effect
Fair, ethical treatment as reason to stay	60.3%	Strongest anchor

Table 1. The gap between top-level commitment and employee-level experience of sustainability.

One result cuts against the general pattern and is, for that reason, the most instructive. Fair and ethical treatment was the single strongest reason employees gave for wanting to remain (60.3 per cent). Fairness differs from the other practices in one decisive respect: employees encounter it directly and daily, and it requires no communication campaign to be felt. Where sustainability depends on being told, fairness depends only on being experienced. The contrast points to the mechanism behind the whole pattern.

4. Diagnosing the Gap: Why Documented Sustainability Fails to Retain

Three interacting failures explain why comprehensively documented sustainability produces so little retention value. The first is a communication failure. When barely a quarter of staff know what the organisation is trying to achieve, the practices cannot be perceived, and an unperceived practice cannot trigger the reciprocity that social exchange theory describes. The second is a credibility failure. When a third of employees see no real resources behind the policy, they infer that the commitment is presentational rather than genuine, and perceived organisational support, the engine of retention in organisational support theory, does not form (Karatepe et al., 2022; Van der Westhuizen & Malan, 2023). The third is a consistency failure. Where practice varies by department and manager, sustainability becomes a two-tiered experience in which some employees feel supported and others do not, so that the organisation cannot claim a uniform effect on its workforce.

In the specific setting of professional services, a fourth pressure compounds these failures. The economics of billable hours and client deadlines routinely override formal commitments to balance, so that work-life policies exist on paper while the lived reality contradicts them, a tension well documented in demanding service environments (Oladipo & Alabi, 2021). Employees are quick to detect this gap between statement and reality, and the detection is corrosive: a stated commitment that is visibly not honoured does more damage to trust than no commitment at all.

5. Repositioning Sustainability as a Strategic Retention Instrument

The remedy is not more policy. It is a change in how sustainable practices are positioned and managed, from a compliance and reputational activity owned by a corporate function to a strategic retention instrument owned by leadership and delivered to every employee. Five moves define the repositioning.

5.1 Close the communication gap

Sustainability that is not communicated cannot retain. Firms should treat internal communication of sustainability goals, initiatives and progress as a continuous obligation rather than an annual report, using concrete and regular updates through the channels employees actually use. The aim is to raise the proportion of employees who can articulate what the organisation is doing and why, because perception is the precondition for every downstream effect.

5.2 Make resource investment visible

Because employees read resourcing as the truest signal of priority, investment must be not only made but seen. Dedicated staffing, funded initiatives and protected time for sustainability work convert abstract commitment into observable evidence of genuine priority, addressing the credibility failure that hollows out perceived support (Krekel, Ward, & De Neve, 2019).

5.3 Standardise practice across departments

A two-tiered experience of sustainability should be closed deliberately. Holding department heads accountable for consistent application, documenting the practices of high-performing units and supporting weaker ones towards parity would replace a patchwork with a uniform employee experience, which is the only kind that can produce an organisation-wide retention effect.

5.4 Embed wellbeing as a design objective

Where wellbeing is treated as an assumed by-product of sustainability, it should instead be designed in as an explicit objective, with sustainability communications framed in terms of concrete employee benefit. Line managers are central to this translation, since it is at their level that organisational intent becomes daily experience (Dulal-Arthur, Hassard, & Bourke, 2024). Redesigning work-life provisions around actual utilisation rather than nominal availability would begin to close the gap between stated and lived commitment.

5.5 Build on fairness as the credible foundation

Finally, firms should build outward from what already works. Fair and ethical treatment is the sector's most credible retention anchor precisely because it is experienced rather than announced, and it aligns with the organisational justice basis of affective commitment (Van der Westhuizen & Malan, 2023). Extending the same direct, experiential quality to the rest of the sustainability agenda, so that each practice is something employees encounter rather than something they are merely told about, is the surest way to convert sustainability from reputation into retention.

6. Implications and Conclusion

For human resource leaders and executives in Nigerian professional services, the strategic implication is a shift of emphasis from designing sustainability to delivering it. The retention dividend that the literature associates with sustainable practice is available, but only to firms that treat implementation, communication and consistency as seriously as they treat policy formulation. For policymakers concerned with the retention of scarce professional talent in the face of emigration, the same logic applies at the sectoral level: initiatives that reach employees in visible, resourced and consistent form are the ones likely to influence the decision to stay.

The central argument of this paper is that sustainable organisational practices in Nigerian professional service firms are under-positioned. They are managed as compliance and reputation when they should be managed as a strategic instrument of retention. The evidence of a wide gap between top-level commitment and employee-level experience shows that the problem is one of delivery rather than intent, and that fairness, the one practice employees experience directly, already demonstrates what a well-delivered sustainable practice can do for retention. Repositioning sustainability so that all of its practices share that experiential quality is not a peripheral HR refinement. In a sector whose competitive advantage is its people, and in a country where those people are actively being drawn away, it is a strategic imperative.

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