

The High Cost of Low Wages: Does Maquiladora Compensation Reduce Turnover?

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We determined which compensation practices of American-owned plants in Mexico reduced turnover. Regression revealed that profit-sharing and saving plans lowered

turnover, while most pay forms did not. We discussed these findings within a national culture approach to compensation administration.

Maquiladoras are vital to American and Mexican economies. These American-owned factories reside in Mexican bordertowns where they receive components duty-free for assembly and re-export finished products that are taxed on the labor value added. Since its 1966 founding, the maquila industry has burgeoned to 4,000 plants (Sunoo, 2000). American enterprises

can thus price products more competitively in global markets by capitalizing on an hourly Mexican compensation that is 30% of U.S. pay (Tully, 1999). Meanwhile, maquila operations provide the largest source of foreign exchange for Mexico and employ one-tenth of its industrial workforce, alleviating severe unemployment (Cravey, 1998).

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Despite phenomenal growth of border-town factories, turnover rates routinely exceed 100% annually, threatening their continued expansion (Picou and Peluchon, 1995). Exorbitant turnover imposes significant personnel costs and inhibits entry of sophisticated manufacturing facilities that demand substantial worker training (Sargent, 1997). Turnover costs will mount as industry maturation and emerging high-tech maquilas using advanced manufacturing technology make training and replacing an increasingly skilled workforce costlier (Sargent, 1997).

To deter turnover, maquila employers bestow numerous perquisites, such as transportation, food coupons, and bonuses (Baker, Smith, and Weiner, 1993). Our investigation evaluates whether maquila perks and benefits stem turnover. Though pervasive, verification of their efficacy for sustaining loyalty is nonexistent. Because these inducements drive up labor costs (Lenckus, 1993), widespread—often anecdotal—claims about their success warrant validation. This study advances the emerging maquila human resources management (HRM) literature by examining how an array of economic enticements affects plant-level turnover. Concurrently, our maquila pay inquiry extends international compensation research, which has mainly considered expatriate or executive pay (Dowling, Schuler, and Welch, 1994; Phatak, 1992). To our knowledge, this is the first inquiry of the compensation-retention relationship in Latin America. Furthermore, we perform a rare test of cross-national generalizability of pay effects on turnover, which have predominantly been examined with North or Anglo-Americans (Hom and Griffeth, 1995). Finally, we contribute to the paucity of studies on firm-level turnover to derive

valid company-wide prescriptions for personnel retention (Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, and Gupta, 1998). After all, traditional findings of pay effects at individual or industry levels may not generalize to the firm level where crucial compensation decisions are made (Gomez-Mejia and Balkin, 1992).

FIXED PAY EFFECTS

Maquila factories provide several kinds of fixed pay: base pay, overtime, and cost of living adjustments (COLA). Turnover and labor economic perspectives uphold their importance for loyalty. To illustrate, turnover scholars universally maintain that superior remuneration promotes retention by increasing job satisfaction or turnover costs (Hom and Griffeth, 1995). Likewise, efficiency wage theory posits that attractive wages deter resignations (Leonard, 1987), while the wealth maximization model contends that workers stay in firms that compensate their counterparts well for such generosity signals earnings growth for them (Galizzi and Lang, 1998). Further, prevailing compensation administration rests on the premise that competitive wages underpin loyalty (Gomez-Mejia, Balkin, and Cardy, 2001). Supporting these theories and received wisdom, studies conclude that high wages decrease turnover (Galizzi and Lang, 1998; Hom, and Griffeth, 1995). By extension, high-paying maquila plants should have lower turnover.

Further sustaining this contention, maquila operators' economic plight and cultural traits may induce them to remain in companies offering attractive fixed pay. Given sizeable purchasing power losses due to constant currency devaluations, most maquila workers earn subsistence wages (Cravey, 1998). Their dire economic circumstances

should discourage them from leaving high-wage firms. Moreover, Mexicans may welcome stable and predictable income, given their intolerance for uncertainty (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2001). Such cultural compatibility translates into higher workforce retention for well-paying companies (Schuler and Rogovsky, 1998). Finally, maquila assemblers themselves blame poor wages for why they or their co-workers resign (Maertz, Stevens, Campion, and Fernandez, 1996). Given widespread consensus on fixed pay's essentiality, we put forth the following:

Hypothesis 1: In maquiladoras, high fixed pay is associated with lower turnover.

VARIABLE PAY EFFECTS

Border plants offer several types of variable pay, including productivity bonuses, seniority and attendance bonuses, and profit-sharing (Picou and Peluchon, 1995). Studies document that individual incentives deter turnover among high performers but drive away low performers when performance largely determines income (Hom and Griffeth, 1995). Given such opposing effects, individual incentives may produce no net reduction in firm-level turnover. In support, Powell, Montgomery and Cosgrove (1994) found that productivity-based wage dispersions within establishments did not decrease establishment turnover. Extrapolating from this work, we posit that individual incentives, such as productivity bonuses, will not reduce maquila plant-wide turnover.

Indeed, rewards for individual accomplishments may prove counterproductive for they clash with Mexican collectivism and uncertainty avoidance (Schuler and Rogovsky, 1998). Collectiv-

ists fear that differential rewards create status differences that motivate group members to sacrifice group interests for self-interests and threaten group solidarity (Chen, Chen and Meindl, 1998). Upholding this thesis, Guendelman and Silberg (1993) reported that productivity bonuses do not enhance work satisfaction among maquila laborers. Accordingly, we offer the following:

Hypothesis 2: In maquiladoras, productivity bonuses are associated with higher turnover.

By contrast, seniority and attendance bonuses—rewards for organizational participation rather than productivity—should reinforce maquila incumbency. Domestic management and labor-economic theories and research suggest that financial inducements for participation, especially for job tenure, foster loyalty (Garen, 1988). For example, commitment and turnover formulations propose that basing pay on seniority makes departures costly—due to forfeiture of seniority benefits—or enhances the expected utility of continued employment (Hom and Griffeth, 1995). By a different logic, labor economists argue that employers distribute higher wages to long-service workers who accumulated more human capital over their tenure, thereby reducing their turnover propensity (Garen, 1988).

In line with our assertion, Schuler and Rogovsky (1998) documented how seniority-based wages pervade high uncertainty avoidance societies, such as Mexico. Examining another collectivist culture, Lincoln (1989) also observed that tenure-contingent pay commits Japanese employees to corporations. Unlike individual performance bonuses, incentives that recognize organizational membership and participation (e.g., attendance)

do not engender competition and disrupt the harmonious work environment Mexicans value (Schuler, Jackson, Jackofsky and Slocum, 1996). Consequently, we submit this hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: In maquiladoras, seniority and attendance bonuses are associated with lower turnover.

Similarly, profit-sharing should deter maquila turnover. Explorations of how organization-wide incentives impact company turnover are rare, but Wilson and Peel (1991) documented that profit-sharing reduces establishment-level turnover. Importantly, Hofstede (1980) prescribes collective rewards for nations like Mexico (Elenkov, 1998). Profit-sharing fits with Mexicans' cultural orientation by encouraging cooperation and rewarding group achievement, though their riskiness may conflict with Mexican uncertainty avoidance. The preceding arguments imply the following:

Hypothesis 4: In maquiladoras, profit-sharing is associated with reduced turnover.

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS EFFECTS

Organizational and labor-economic investigations find that benefits prolong employment (Ippolito, 1997; Shaw et al., 1998). Generalizing from domestic work, maquila services and perks that conform to maquila workers' culture, demography, or financial need should sustain job incumbency. Given their strong family orientation and desire for scheduling flexibility to manage domestic obligations (Maertz et al., 1996), family-friendly benefits should improve maquila retention. Specifically, additional vacation days permit more time with family, including extended home visits with relatives in distant rural communi-

ties (Kopinak, 1996). After all, the maquila workforce comprises mainly women who are prime caretakers of family members and often abandon paid employment to attend to family duties (Tiano and Lidano, 1999). This reasoning yields the following:

Hypothesis 5: In maquiladoras, vacation premium and days are associated with reduced turnover.

Because their buying power has shrunk by 50% since 1980 (Dougherty and Holthouse, 1998), maquila operatives should appreciate subsidized meals and additional pay in the form of "aguinaldo," a Christmas bonus. Due to higher debt and less disposable income, maquila families spend more on food than non-maquiladora households (Cravey, 1998). Moreover, aguinaldo may encourage assemblers to stay until year's end to qualify for this money, which is borne out by Kopinak's (1996) observation that maquila turnover occurs least just before Christmas. Given these facts, we advance the next hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: In maquiladoras, meal subsidies and aguinaldo are associated with decreased turnover.

In all likelihood, generous savings plans, in which companies contribute matching funds, should lessen turnover. Savings plans help maquila laborers accumulate savings, a daunting task given that costly goods and housing in border cities easily consume paychecks (Dougherty and Holthouse, 1998). Because maquila workers are often rural migrants, they seek capital for land or home purchases—or even migration (Guendelman, Samuels, and Ramirez, 1998). Along with Ippolito's (1997) finding that 401K contributions boost retention, this discussion implies:

Hypothesis 7: In maquiladoras, saving plans are associated with reduced turnover.

METHOD

Sample

Twice a year, consultants surveyed General Managers from 115 plants in Nogales, Juarez, and Reynosa about maquila compensation. Though representing 29 factory jobs, most workers labored as assemblers. Most firms belonged to the electronics industry, while others represented automotive and transport equipment, sewing, plastics, coupon redemption, and pharmaceutical industries. Americans comprised 75% of management, while the plants averaged 695 workers.

Measurement

We tested Hypothesis 1 by examining average weekly pay, COLA, average overtime, and percent workers earning the minimum wage. Because workers in the same job earn identical base pay, we computed a weighted mean for weekly and overtime pay, weighing each job's flat rate by number of incumbents. We then computed real wages, overtime, and COLA using consumer price indices (CPI) from *Banco de México* (Kopinak, 1996).

We evaluated Hypothesis 3 with survey descriptions about presence of seniority and attendance bonuses. For Hypotheses 2 and 4, we calculated a weighted mean of productivity bonus (per job category) and average profit-sharing earnings, adjusting those indices with the Mexican CPI. We examined Hypothesis 5 with survey indices of vacation premium and extra vacation days. For Hypothesis 6, we inspected survey measures of meal subsidies and aguinaldo.

Survey reports of the savings plan and company matching contribution to this plan evaluated Hypothesis 7.

The survey reported average monthly voluntary turnover rates (during the past six months) among workers ($M = 3.42\%$).

Statistical Analyses

Using two waves of survey data, regression analyses predicted later turnover with pay predictors measured six months earlier. To boost statistical power, we examined each set of compensation forms (fixed pay, variable pay, and benefits) separately. Regression also controlled for past turnover, plant size, city, and industry. In a hierarchical order, we entered control variables (Step 1) before estimating compensation effects (Step 2).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics, and Table 2 presents regression tests for base-pay predictors. Among control variables, only past turnover predicted turnover in Step 1. Adding all fixed pay predictors in Step 2 did not bolster prediction, disputing Hypothesis 1. By contrast, variable pay predictors in combination explained unique turnover variance. Productivity pay positively predicted turnover (supporting Hypothesis 2), while profit-sharing negatively predicted turnover (upholding Hypothesis 4). That attendance and seniority rewards did not positively predict turnover contradicts Hypothesis 3.

The set of fringe benefits explained unique turnover variance. Savings plan contributions negatively predicted turnover, partly verifying Hypothesis 7. Other findings opposed Hypotheses 5 and 6, rejecting the efficacy of vacation benefits, meal subsidies, and aguinaldo.

TABLE 1
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND CORRELATIONS AMONG PAY PREDICTORS

Pay Predictors	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. % Minimum Wage	36.6	29.80	—												
2. Weekly Wage	186112.9	39336.61	-.237	—											
3. COLA	18.0	5.25	-.146	.177	—										
4. Overtime Pay	37981.1	40521.20	-.129	.255	.183	—									
5. Seniority Bonus	.46	.44	-.041	.020	-.094	.136	—								
6. Attendance Bonus	.82	.34	.177	-.042	-.005	.037	.021	—							
7. Profit-Sharing	123993.62	114677.43	-.019	-.054	-.032	-.027	.122	.219	—						
8. Productivity Bonus	35944.51	27886.01	.096	-.074	-.100	.074	.218	.093	-.083	—					
9. Meal Subsidy	.95	.18	.086	-.153	.022	.056	.092	-.104	-.063	-.235	—				
10. Savings Matching % Contribution	5.87	9.92	.251	.267	.039	.060	.100	.097	-.110	-.020	.027	—			
11. Extra Vacation Days	.65	1.20	.248	.258	-.091	-.067	.009	.106	-.203	-.083	.104	.163	—		
12. Vacation Premiums	28.13	6.55	.223	-.207	.016	.012	-.025	-.199	.096	.003	.092	.175	-.071	—	
13. Aguinaldo	16.00	2.00	.146	-.202	.145	-.111	.152	-.247	.041	-.073	.096	.212	-.079	.456	—
14. Savings Plan	.54	.44	.233	.069	.115	.116	-.028	.038	-.063	.023	.018	.479	.075	.371	.304

Note: Bold correlations are significant at $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed).

TABLE 2
TURNOVER PREDICTIONS

Base Pay Model			Variable Pay Model			Benefits Model		
Predictors	β	ΔR^2	Predictors	β	ΔR^2	Predictors	β	ΔR^2
Step 1			Step 1			Step 1		
Size	0.133	.016	Size	0.133	.016	Size	0.133	.016
Locale		.005	Locale		.005	Locale		.005
Past Turnover	0.351**	.115**	Past Turnover	0.351**	.115**	Past Turnover	0.351**	.115**
Industry		.059	Industry		.059	Industry		.059
Adjusted R^2	0.124**		Adjusted R^2	0.124**		Adjusted R^2	0.132**	
Step 2			Step 2			Step 2		
Base Pay	-.020	.000	Productivity Pay	0.160*	.022*	Aguinaldo	0.122	.007
Overtime	0.132	.014	Profit-Sharing	-.165*	.022*	Savings	0.192	.016
COLA	-.018	.000	Seniority Premiums	0.172*	.023*	Savings Matching %	-.263**	.045**
% Minimum Wage	0.100	.008	Attendance Premiums	-.007	.000	Vacation Premiums	-.069	.002
						Extra Vacation	0.249**	.053**
						Meal Subsidy	0.105	.010
Adjusted R^2	0.113**		Adjusted R^2	0.183**		Adjusted R^2	0.213**	
ΔR^2 for Base Pay		.021	ΔR^2 for Variable Pay		.082**	ΔR^2 for Benefits		.115**

Note. Locale and industry are dummy coded.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

Despite a broad sampling of 115 firms from three cities and extensive array of compensation measures, our most provocative discovery was the scant support for widespread domestic findings that material inducements underlie job stability (Hom and Griffeth, 1995). Our inquiry also furnishes persuasive evidence that a compensation plan featuring competitive benefits has different outcomes in the Mexican culture than one might expect among domestic workers. Further, our findings refuted the purported loyalty-inducing efficacy of many maquila perks and incentives.

Our research suggests that extant compensation and turnover theories, all of which reflect strong Anglo-American biases, must be refined to incorporate contextual factors, including local cultural norms and labor force characteristics. Otherwise, their logic and their empirical underpinnings lack universal applicability. Considering that compensation expense is one of the key costs organizations face and that pay remedies are considered critical to turnover reduction in the HRM literature, continued efforts at tailoring models for particular international environments may yield significant dividends for scholarly and applied perspectives.

Several explanations underlie these findings. For economic and patriarchic reasons, maquilas may regard their largely female workforce as "temporary" by withholding job security and advancement prospects. Ironically, long service itself may signal a turnover risk to employers, who subscribe to a *marianismo* ideology presuming that women will quit once they marry or bear children (Tiano, 1994).

Collectivism may explain why profit-sharing, but not individual incentives, bonds Mexicans. The cultural fit thesis implies that individual incentives conflict with Mexican collectivism but that group incentives accord with this value (Newman and Nollen, 1996). Discontinuity between culture and compensation underlies why some pay tactics did not work. Local knowledge of a particular nation must augment this thesis to yield accurate insight into what functions best there.

Moreover, many maquila benefits are delivered based on performance and are withheld for poor performance (Schuler et al., 1996). A system based on calculative exchange surely clashes with Mexican partiality for collective forms of recognition. Rather, human resource-based elements, such as training opportunities and clean, safe physical surroundings, better satisfy collectivist preferences (Butler and Teagarden, 2000). Besides, American emphasis on material inducements fits with individualist cultures that extol pursuit of self-interests better than collectivist societies that give higher priority to group goals and view employer-employee relationships as communal.

Further, narrow wage dispersion across facilities attenuated fixed-pay effects. Many scholars and journalists have noted that maquilas often pay at or near the minimum wage, which fails to afford basic necessities (Catanzarite and Strober, 1993). As one manager put it, "We all participated in a salary survey, and agreed to offer the same starting wage" (Dougherty and Holthouse, 1998). Besides wage collusion, Mexico's low minimum wage (to attract foreign capital) and tax policy (overtaxing income above the minimum wage) further constrain wages' ability to extend tenure

(Catanzarite and Strober, 1993; Cravey, 1998).

Ultimately, paltry financial enticements cannot offset more powerful countervailing social and economic forces for maquila departures (Guendelman et al., 1998). When long work hours and commutes jeopardize family duties, women assemblers quit, knowing they can easily resume maquila employment (Tiano and Ladino, 1999). By comparison, male workers exit maquilas to work across the border where they can earn in an hour what they earn in a day in Mexico (Dougherty and Holthouse, 1998).

As with all research, methodological limitations plague our findings. First, we collected plant-level rather than individual-level data. While a methodological strength from a pay policy perspective (Gomez-Mejia and Balkin, 1992), firm-level results may not generate pay solutions for curbing individual turnover (Shaw et al., 1998). Second, a single respondent, General Managers, supplied pay statistics. Still, they paid to participate in a wage survey and should be motivated to provide accurate data for benchmarking purposes. Third, more proximal determinants mediating pay-turnover relations were omitted, such as perceptions of distributive and procedural justice (Hom and Griffeth, 1995).

Future cross-national inquiries on compensation determinants of turnover should assess compensation strategy. Structural features of the pay package may influence terminations more than do measures of pay amounts. Explorations into infrequent maquila benefits (e.g., housing) might show stronger compensation effects on retention. Moreover, precise indices of extent and quality of benefits and services might reveal their efficacy better than dichotomous availability indices. Additionally, future re-

search should use survival analysis to examine how pay influences turnover occurrence and timing.

In conclusion, our results do not imply that maquilas should abandon their compensation programs. Quite likely, these popular inducements confer little competitive advantage to employers for they are easily imitated. Yet without these lures, maquila owners would surely be disadvantaged in attracting and holding personnel. For "competitive parity," they must continue to match what competitors offer, although most perks fail to give them an edge. Rather, our findings indicate that maquilas should enrich the few effective enticements without discarding other customary perks. To fund these programs, firms might cut back seniority incentives and extra vacation days, which when given more abundantly than the competition actually provokes resignations.

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