

INTERNAL MOBILITY AND EMPLOYEE RETENTION IN HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT: INSIGHTS FROM IBM'S SKILLSFIRST MODEL

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Abstract

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Although research on employee retention has grown, the link between human resources management (HRM) practices and retention remains underexplored (Xing et al., 2025; Al-Ayed, 2025). Retaining skilled employees is critical in knowledge-intensive sectors, where talent drives innovation, adaptability, and competitive advantage. Organizations that fail to address retention risk lose high-potential employees, undermining strategic agility and long-term performance. Internal mobility is often studied as a tool for reallocating high performers, yet from a knowledge-based perspective, it also can facilitate the circulation of tacit knowledge, the recombination of perspectives, and the development of collective capabilities, enhancing organizational learning and resilience. This study examines the role of internal mobility in employee retention through a case study of IBM's SkillsFirst human resources (HR) model. By analyzing qualitative employee perspectives, the research identifies organizational conditions and mechanisms through which internal mobility supports retention, while acknowledging contextual factors and potential limitations. Findings aim to provide both theoretical insights for adaptive HRM and practical guidance for organizations seeking to strengthen employee commitment and career development pathways.

Keywords: Internal Mobility, Retention, IBM, Employee Retention, Knowledge-Intensive Organizations, Internal Labor Markets

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although research on employee retention has expanded significantly in recent years (Steel et al., 2002), the connection between human resources management (HRM) practices and employee retention remains underexplored (Hausknecht et al., 2009; Bandura & Lyons, 2014). Employee retention is a critical concern for contemporary organizations

operating in dynamic and competitive labor markets (Meirinhos et al., 2018; Singh, 2019; Chatzoudes & Chatzoglou, 2022), particularly given that human capital is widely regarded as the most valuable organizational resource (Nyberg et al., 2014). The retention of skilled employees can be critical in knowledge-intensive and rapidly changing sectors, where talent drives innovation, organizational adaptability, and competitive advantage (Govaerts

et al., 2011; Kraimer et al., 2011; Lestariningsih et al., 2026). Furthermore, employee retention has been strongly linked to the design and implementation of HRM practices (Chatzoudes & Chatzoglou, 2022; Allen et al., 2017; Singh, 2019).

Internal mobility initiatives, such as structured talent marketplaces and skills-based career pathways, have been increasingly adopted to foster employee engagement and commitment (Al-Ayed, 2025; Armas et al., 2025). However, the mechanisms through which these initiatives may influence retention outcomes remain underexplored in empirical research.

Hom et al. (2017) noted that employee retention can be a central component of organizational effectiveness. Their findings suggested that both psychological and job-related factors frequently undermine retention efforts. Employees may discover that their roles do not align with their initial expectations, notice a mismatch between the job requirements and the employee's personality or working style, etc. All of the above can hinder employee performance and reduce engagement. When tasks are poorly aligned with personal characteristics, employees may struggle to perform effectively and tend to disengage from their responsibilities (Edwards, 1991; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Breugh & Starke, 2000; Saks, 2006).

Rigby et al. (2016) and Maruping et al. (2009) provided an extensive review of the literature on agile human resources (HR), exploring its core principles, implementation approaches, and advantages. The review highlighted several principles commonly associated with agile HR, such as cyclical work processes, continuous feedback mechanisms, and cross-functional collaboration. Agile HRM has emerged as a contemporary approach that emphasizes flexibility, responsiveness, and adaptability in HRM practices, enabling HR functions to respond more effectively to dynamic organizational environments and support continuous improvement (Moh'd et al., 2024).

These practices may contribute to improvements in selected HR processes and to higher levels of employee involvement, although the strength and consistency of these effects appear to vary across organizational contexts (Denning, 2018; Rigby et al., 2016; Tripp et al., 2016). Agile HR can enhance operational performance and employee satisfaction. At the same time, cultivating a more adaptive and innovative organizational environment and stressing the need for cultural readiness, committed leadership, and ongoing capability development can be important.

Ensuring the retention of key employees may be essential for sustaining long-term organizational performance (Khan, 2020). Effective retention can contribute to stronger sales outcomes, higher customer satisfaction, more cohesive teams, and smoother succession planning (Huselid, 1995; Becker & Huselid, 1998; Batt, 2002; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Shaw et al., 2005). Retaining experienced employees can contribute to organizational stability by preserving firm-specific knowledge and reducing disruptions linked to employee turnover (Shaw et al., 2005; Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011). Innovative HRM strategies, such as flexible working arrangements, the use of digital HR tools, sustainability-oriented initiatives, and continuous employee development,

have been associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which in turn have been linked to lower turnover intentions (Allen et al., 2017; Govaerts et al., 2011). Moreover, strategic HRM practices, including targeted training and development programs, performance-based reward systems, flexible work designs, and clearly articulated career paths, can contribute to employee retention by strengthening engagement and reinforcing employees' attachment to the organization (Hausknecht et al., 2009; Kraimer et al., 2011).

The need for organizations to understand and respond to the distinct traits, expectations, and work preferences of Generation Z has also been highlighted (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Twenge et al., 2010). Employers are encouraged to prioritize clear communication, flexible HR practices, and initiatives that support work-life integration in order to attract, engage, and retain such members. By incorporating these insights into their people-management strategies, organizations can create a more collaborative, innovative, and high-performing work environment that may support the effectiveness and development of Generation Z alongside employees from other generations (Mishra & Pandey, 2024). Tailoring these practices to the preferences of specific workforce segments, particularly Generation Z, who tend to value technological integration and autonomy, has become increasingly significant. Moreover, initiatives in green HRM combined with strong workplace relationships can contribute to cultivating a positive organizational culture, further supporting employee retention (Renwick et al., 2013; Pham et al., 2019).

Organizations that fail to address these factors risk the disproportionate loss of high-performing employees, which prior research has associated with negative implications for organizational performance and the loss of valuable human capital resources (Shaw et al., 2005; Nyberg, 2010). From a human capital perspective, such losses may weaken an organization's capacity to sustain strategic capabilities and adapt over time (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). While internal mobility is often examined within the talent management literature as a tool for reallocating high performers, organizational learning research suggests a broader function. From a knowledge-based perspective, employee mobility facilitates the circulation of tacit knowledge, the recombination of perspectives, and the development of collective capabilities, thereby contributing to organizational learning and resilience rather than merely individual advancement (March, 1991; Argote, 1999; Nonaka, 1994).

Moreover, contemporary workforce dynamics have introduced additional complexity to employee retention strategies. As noted, younger generations, particularly Generation Z, place increased emphasis on meaningful work, opportunities for development, flexibility, and value alignment, rendering traditional retention mechanisms such as compensation and job security insufficient on their own (Twenge et al., 2010; Schroth, 2019; Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Costanza et al., 2012). At the same time, the broader retention literature indicates that organizations failing to adopt integrated HRM practices risk increased voluntary turnover, including the loss of high-potential employees, with possible negative

implications for long-term organizational resilience, stability, and performance (Hausknecht et al., 2009; Allen et al., 2017; Wenyan et al., 2024).

Modern employees exhibit increased expectations regarding career development, skill enhancement, and mobility opportunities within the organizations, rather than solely financial compensation (de Lange et al., 2008). Traditional static career models are often insufficient to meet these evolving demands, highlighting the importance of innovative HR strategies.

Internal mobility, defined as the structured movement of employees across different roles or functions within the same organization, has emerged as a strategic mechanism to enhance retention (Govaerts et al., 2011; DeVaro & Waldman, 2012; Ray, 2024). By offering opportunities for career growth, skill development, and exposure to diverse experiences, internal mobility can strengthen employee engagement and commitment while encouraging people to stay and grow within the organization, ultimately reducing turnover intentions (Kraimer et al., 2011).

The literature review can provide valuable insights into innovative HRM strategies and employee retention; however, several notable gaps remain (Sharma et al., 2021). Empirical and contextual limitations are highlighted in the work of Papa et al. (2020), Fahim (2018), and Maureen et al. (2020), which are restricted in regard to the generalizability of their findings across diverse regions and industries. A number of studies in the field have relied primarily on cross-sectional survey designs, which may limit causal inference and the depth of contextual understanding (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Furthermore, prior research has highlighted the need for more integrative approaches that account for both empirical and theoretical gaps in HRM and sustainability literature (Boselie et al., 2005; Jackson & Seo, 2010).

Social capital offers an additional pathway linking HRM practices to employee retention. Internal mobility and collaborative HR systems can build relational networks, trust, and shared organizational understanding, helping employees feel more connected to the organization and more committed to staying. By strengthening relational ties and facilitating knowledge exchange across organizational units, HRM practices may generate social capital that can indirectly reduce turnover intentions and support long-term retention outcomes (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Adler & Kwon, 2002; Leana & van Buren, 1999; Jiang et al., 2012; Hom et al., 2017). In this perspective, internal mobility can be understood not only as a structural career mechanism but also as a social process that expands relational capital and internal opportunity awareness (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Burt, 1992; Bidwell, 2011).

Although prior research has extensively examined employee retention (Allen et al., 2017; Govaerts et al., 2011) and the role of developmental HRM practices in supporting employee engagement and career outcomes (Kraimer et al., 2011), the specific mechanisms through which innovative HRM initiatives translate into improved retention remain insufficiently theorized. Studies often highlight the importance of learning opportunities, career support, and organizational development

practices, yet they rarely identify how these practices can influence retention beyond general relations (Govaerts et al., 2011). Furthermore, although evidence suggests that access to career opportunities and developmental resources may reduce turnover intentions (Kraimer et al., 2011; de Lange et al., 2008), the role of internal mobility as a structured and strategic indirect mechanism has received limited empirical attention.

Consequently, there is a lack of integrated frameworks that can explain how innovative HRM practices may enable internal mobility pathways that, in turn, may enhance employee retention. This gap is particularly prominent in contemporary, skills-driven organizational environments, where mobility, employability, and continuous learning are central to employees' sustainability (Lepak & Snell, 1999; Bidwell & Keller, 2014; De Vos et al., 2020; Cappelli & Keller, 2017). Despite the growing implementation of internal mobility programs in organizational practice, research systematically examining internal mobility as a distinct retention strategy remains relatively limited. The broader retention literature has traditionally focused on attitudinal and contextual predictors of turnover, such as job satisfaction, organizational support, and compensation, rather than treating internal mobility as an independent mechanism influencing retention outcomes (Griffeth et al., 2000; Allen et al., 2017; Hom et al., 2017). Although recent studies have begun to explore the relationship between internal mobility and employee retention, this stream of research remains fragmented and context-dependent, underscoring the need for more integrated theoretical and empirical frameworks (Bidwell & Mollick, 2015; DeVaro & Waldman, 2012). This study investigates the role of internal mobility in employee retention through a case study of IBM's SkillsFirst HR model. By analyzing qualitative employee perspectives, this paper aims to identify the organizational conditions and mechanisms through which internal mobility may contribute to employee retention, while also addressing potential limitations and contextual factors.

The main objective of this study is to clarify how internal mobility functions as a retention-oriented HRM practice by examining the organizational mechanisms, enabling conditions, and employee experiences through which mobility initiatives can influence retention outcomes.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on internal mobility, HRM practices, and employee retention, highlighting the theoretical frameworks and recent empirical findings. Section 3 presents the research methodology, including the case selection, data sources, and analytical approach. Section 4 outlines the empirical findings from IBM's SkillsFirst HR model and provides a discussion linking these findings to broader HRM theory and practice. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper with implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between HRM practices and employee retention outcomes has evolved significantly within the strategic HRM literature, reflecting a shift from administrative personnel

management toward value-creating organizational practices (Wright & McMahan, 1992; Huselid, 1995; Becker & Huselid, 1998). Early research emphasized job satisfaction and organizational commitment as key predictors of retention, highlighting how supportive HR policies may influence employees' intention to remain (Mowday et al., 2013; Price & Mueller, 1981). During the 1990s, the emergence of high-performance work systems reframed HRM practices as integrated bundles designed to enhance both organizational performance and employee outcomes, including reduced turnover (Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1998). Studies further demonstrated that developmental and relational practices, such as career development opportunities, internal mobility, training, and participative management, can strengthen perceived organizational support and psychological contract, thereby fostering retention (Allen et al., 2003; Kuvaas, 2008). More recent research has adopted a strategic and employee-centered perspective, emphasizing how HRM practices can shape employee experiences, engagement, and long-term employability, which in turn can influence retention decisions (Jiang et al., 2012). Employee retention has evolved into a central concern within HRM, although this was not always the case (Cappelli, 2000; Gratton & Truss, 2003; Collings & Mellahi, 2009). The emergence of the human relations movement shifted attention toward employee attitudes, motivation, and organizational commitment, recognizing the role of social and psychological factors in sustaining employee stability (Rousseau, 1995; Eisenberger et al., 1986). Employees are considered valuable organizational assets and sources of competitive advantage (Beer et al., 1984; Pfeffer, 1998). More recently, retention has been linked to broader outcomes such as organizational performance, employee well-being, and employer branding (Allen et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2023; Alzaid & Dukhaykh, 2023; Igbinoba et al., 2022; Mosquera & Soares, 2025).

Internal mobility has traditionally been examined through the lens of internal labor market theory, which conceptualizes organizations as structured systems where vacancies are primarily filled from within, rather than through external hiring (Doeringer & Piore, 1985). From this perspective, internal mobility functions as a mechanism for allocating labor efficiently, reducing recruitment costs, and providing employees with structured and predictable career pathways. Organizational practices such as promotion pathways, clear advancement rules, and internal transfers can be understood as institutional arrangements that can stabilize employment relationships and support the development of organization-specific skills and knowledge (Bidwell, 2011; Cappelli, 2008).

Research in strategic HRM has further suggested that internal mobility systems can enhance retention by increasing perceived career opportunities and reducing voluntary turnover intentions, particularly in knowledge-intensive environments, where skill accumulation and internal career progression are critical components (Hom et al., 2017; De Vos et al., 2020). For many talented employees, the security of remaining within the organization and the perceived ability to advance internally are crucial factors in retention, as they can pursue career development without

the disruption of changing employers and restarting from entry-level positions (De Vos et al., 2020; Hom et al., 2017). Providing talented employees with internal career opportunities allows them to advance without the disruption of changing organizations, offering both career security and continuity, which can be critical drivers of retention in knowledge-intensive contexts (De Vos et al., 2020; Hom et al., 2017; Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Kraimer et al., 2011; Gong et al., 2025).

While this framework has been influential, it largely treats internal mobility as an administrative or economic process, emphasizing efficiency and workforce planning rather than learning or knowledge creation. As a result, it offers limited insight into how internal movement contributes to the development of organizational capabilities or the diffusion of expertise across units.

Research has highlighted that the effectiveness of HRM practices in enhancing employee retention depends on the mechanisms through which these practices tend to influence employee attitudes and behaviors (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Guest, 1997). For instance, employee loyalty and organizational commitment have been identified as key mediators linking flexible work arrangements, leadership styles, and digital HR tools to retention outcomes (Al-Ayed, 2025; Lestariningsih et al., 2026). Similarly, adaptive and innovation-oriented HRM strategies, such as continuous skill development and engagement-focused leadership, have been shown to increase job satisfaction, which in turn may reduce turnover intentions (Armas et al., 2025; Al-Hmesat et al., 2025). Moreover, the alignment of HRM practices with organizational culture and technological capabilities can further strengthen retention by providing employees with a supportive and engaging work environment (Xing et al., 2025; Suriati et al., 2024).

Human capital theory informs research on internal mobility by framing employee movement as an investment decision linked to productivity and performance (Becker, 1964). From this viewpoint, organizations are expected to retain and redeploy individuals with high levels of firm-specific or general human capital, often prioritizing high performers for promotion or strategic transfers (Doeringer & Piore, 1985; Lepak & Snell, 1999). This logic underpins much of the contemporary talent management literature, where internal mobility is frequently associated with succession planning and the retention of top talent (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Cappelli, 2008).

Empirical research often segments employees into performance tiers, assuming that mobility decisions should disproportionately favor high performers to maximize returns on investment (DeVaro & Waldman, 2012). Researchers have argued that an excessive focus on individual performance metrics may overlook the relational, contextual, and interdependent nature of work, particularly in knowledge-intensive and team-based environments (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Grant, 2008). Empirical and theoretical research suggests that organizational outcomes often emerge from collective processes, shared knowledge, and informal collaboration, rather than solely from the actions of isolated high performers (Felin & Foss, 2005; Barney & Felin, 2013; Becker & Huselid, 1998; Pfeffer, 1998). Organizational

learning theory provides a broader conceptualization of internal mobility as a mechanism for knowledge development and transfer. March's (1991) distinction between exploration and exploitation highlighted how movement across roles or units can facilitate exploration by exposing individuals to new contexts, practices, and problem-solving approaches. Internal mobility, in this sense, can be important by enabling the recombination of experiences and perspectives.

Knowledge-based view of the organization further reinforces this interpretation by emphasizing that knowledge is embedded not only in individuals but also in routines, relationships, and social structures (Argote, 1999). Internal mobility can, therefore, contribute to organizational learning by allowing employees to transfer experiential knowledge across units, enhancing collective memory and the firm's absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Minbaeva, 2005). By moving talent internally, organizations can facilitate knowledge sharing, enable cross-functional skill development, and strengthen the mechanisms through which lessons from past projects inform future initiatives (Jansen et al., 2005).

From a theoretical perspective, social exchange theory can be important for understanding how internal mobility practices may influence employee retention. Social exchange theory posits that employment relationships are based on reciprocal exchanges, whereby favorable organizational actions tend to create obligations and positive attitudes among employees (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Opportunities for internal mobility can function as signals of organizational support, long-term investment, and procedural fairness, shaping employees' perceptions of the employment relationship (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). When employees perceive that their organization offers meaningful opportunities for internal movement and development, they may be more inclined to reciprocate through increased commitment and a stronger intention to remain with the organization (Settoon et al., 1996). From this perspective, internal mobility operates not merely as a talent allocation or reward mechanism, but as part of a broader social exchange process that reinforces relational bonds between employees and the organization.

In the same lanes, an important theoretical contribution to understanding internal mobility as a learning mechanism may derive from the concept of tacit knowledge. Polanyi (1966) argued that a significant portion of human knowledge is tacit, context-dependent, and difficult to codify. Such knowledge is acquired through experience and social interaction rather than formal instruction. When internal mobility is systematically facilitated, employees can move across roles, teams, or departments, allowing tacit knowledge to be shared and embedded in new contexts (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Teece, 2007). Specifically, internal mobility can enhance cross-unit learning (employees may transfer insights and practical know-how from one part of the organization to another, improving problem-solving and innovation in receiving units and strengthen collective memory (it may help preserve critical organizational knowledge, reducing the risk of loss when employees leave or roles change (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). It can also develop absorptive capacity, because exposure to diverse roles and

contexts can allow employees and teams to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it effectively, and apply it to improve performance (Jansen et al., 2005). Building on this foundation, Nonaka (1994) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) proposed that organizational knowledge creation occurs through dynamic interactions between tacit and explicit knowledge. Internal mobility facilitates these processes by enabling socialization across teams and functions, thereby supporting the transfer of tacit knowledge that would otherwise remain localized. From this perspective, mobility is not merely a reward or staffing tool but a critical enabler of organizational learning and innovation.

Research has begun to challenge the dominant view of internal mobility as a practice primarily designed for high performers (Benson & Rissing, 2020; Bidwell, 2011; Mawdsley & Somaya, 2016). Studies grounded in sociological and organizational theory suggest that excessive focus on performance-based mobility may increase turnover or undermine collaboration by intensifying internal competition (DeVaro & Waldman, 2012). These findings highlight the need for alternative conceptualizations that recognize the collective and systemic effects of internal movement.

Boundaryless career research further supports this shift by demonstrating that mobility can enhance social capital and knowledge exchange, even within organizational boundaries (Lazarova & Taylor, 2009). Such perspectives align with systemic views of organizations, where value creation depends on interdependencies among roles, teams, collaboration structures, and informal networks rather than isolated individual performance (Inkson et al., 2012; Briscoe et al., 2006; Fasbender et al., 2021).

The literature on internal mobility spans multiple theoretical traditions, including internal labor market theory, human capital theory, organizational learning, and the knowledge-based view of the organization (Lazear & Oyer, 2004; Argote & Ingram, 2000; Campion et al., 1994; Grant, 2008; Kogut & Zander, 1992). While early approaches emphasized efficiency and performance optimization, more recent work highlights the role of internal mobility in facilitating learning, knowledge diffusion, and capability development (Argote & Ingram, 2000). The literature on internal mobility has also progressively moved beyond a narrow association with hierarchical promotion and increasingly recognizes that internal mobility can take multiple forms within organizations. In addition to upward movements, the importance of lateral moves, role changes, and job enrichment as mechanisms for skill development and organizational learning has been emphasized (Campion et al., 1994). Internal mobility has had a significant impact on both employees and organizations (Ray, 2024). Despite its frequency, there remains limited consensus in the literature regarding its precise definition, underlying drivers, and consequential outcomes. However, promising avenues for future research involve capturing the full complexity of internal mobility and developing theoretical frameworks that can be empirically tested to enhance understanding of its mechanisms and effects (Ray, 2024).

Internal mobility cannot be fully understood in isolation from external mobility dynamics (Ray, 2024). Organizations operate in competitive labor markets where employees may choose to leave

if opportunities for growth are limited internally. By facilitating internal moves (lateral, vertical, or through job enrichment), organizations can effectively mitigate the risk of external mobility (Becker & Huselid, 1998; de Lange et al., 2008).

Lateral mobility, in particular, enables employees to acquire new experiences without immediate changes in hierarchical status, thereby enhancing functional flexibility and broadening individual skill sets within the organization (Bidwell, 2011). Similarly, practices such as job rotation and skill enrichment have been linked to the transfer of tacit knowledge, improved understanding of organizational processes, stronger collaboration across organizational units, resilience-building, and sustainable development (Campion et al., 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Oranga, 2023).

Within this perspective, internal mobility does not function solely as a mechanism for rewarding high performance or reallocating talent, but also as a structural tool for human capital development (Campion et al., 1994; Bidwell, 2011). Opportunities for internal movement can contribute to the accumulation of organization-specific knowledge and the development of broader professional identities (Kostova & Roth, 2002), aligning with research on boundaryless and protean career models (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). The protean career model is a career theory that describes careers as self-directed, values-driven, and adaptive, rather than organizationally prescribed. It was developed as a response to the decline of stable, hierarchical career paths (Hall, 2004).

Through repeated role transitions, employees can expand their understanding of how value is created across the organization and gradually construct professional self-concepts that may extend beyond narrow functional or occupational boundaries (Ibarra, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2008; Bidwell & Mollick, 2015). Boundaryless career models describe careers as flexible and learning-oriented, where individuals develop through diverse roles and experiences rather than following a fixed, hierarchical career path within a single job (Tomlinson et al., 2018). The protean career model conceptualizes careers as self-directed and values-driven (Hall, 2004), whereas the boundaryless career model focuses on patterns of mobility that transcend organizational boundaries and traditional employment structures (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006).

Supporting employee learning depends on leadership approaches that explicitly value and may promote learning processes. Prior research distinguishes between direct leadership behaviors, such as guidance, instruction, performance expectations, and role modeling, and indirect leadership behaviors, which may include the cultivation of learning-supportive climates, the shaping of work structures, the building of the allocation of resources for learning, and the facilitation of knowledge sharing (Danko & Crhová, 2025; Harper et al., 2024; Bai, 2025; Viterouli et al., 2024; Fasbender et al., 2021).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

By employing a case study approach, the analysis situates empirical findings within the broader

literature on adaptive HRM, talent management, and organizational commitment (Xing et al., 2025; Al-Hmesat et al., 2025; Lestariningsih et al., 2026), ensuring both theoretical grounding and practical relevance. This study adopts a single-case study design to explore the link between internal mobility initiatives and employee retention, focusing specifically on IBM's SkillsFirst model.

The case was selected due to IBM's global recognition in implementing structured internal mobility strategies and its extensive human capital data, making it an ideal example of HRM best practices in knowledge-intensive environments (Xing et al., 2025; Al-Hmesat et al., 2025). Furthermore, its long-standing emphasis on internal talent markets and skills-based workforce management, particularly through the SkillsFirst HR model, can provide a strong context to examine how internal mobility initiatives can influence employee retention outcomes. The case may offer a rich empirical context for examining internal mobility beyond traditional promotion-based career paths, aligning with the paper's objective to explore internal mobility as a retention-oriented HRM practice. The study further situates its findings within the recent literature on adaptive HRM strategies and employee retention, thereby reinforcing the theoretical grounding of the research (Al-Ayed, 2025; Lestariningsih et al., 2026).

A qualitative case study research design was explored, focusing on internal mobility as an HRM strategy for employee retention within a large multinational organization. Case study methodology is particularly suitable for examining complex organizational phenomena in their real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the organizational setting are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018). In line with theory-building approaches, the case study enables an in-depth understanding of how internal mobility practices are designed, implemented, and experienced within a specific organizational context (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

The selection of IBM followed a purposive sampling logic, commonly applied in qualitative research to maximize theoretical relevance rather than statistical representativeness (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). IBM represents a theoretically meaningful case because it has publicly articulated and operationalized a skills-based approach to internal mobility, supported by digital talent platforms and formal HR policies. These characteristics make IBM a suitable case for examining how internal mobility can function as a strategic HRM mechanism addressing employee retention in knowledge-intensive organizations.

The study relies exclusively on secondary qualitative data, a methodological choice that is appropriate when access to primary data is limited and when organizations provide extensive publicly available material (Yin, 2018). Data were collected from multiple sources in order to enhance the credibility of the analysis (Denzin, 1978). The data sources included official IBM corporate reports and HR publications, publicly available policy documents related to SkillsFirst, internal talent mobility, executive speeches, interviews, and statements published in reputable business and academic outlets, and practitioner-oriented reports

and industry analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the collected material was systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes related to internal mobility practices, skill development, career transitions, and employee retention. Subsequently, these themes were interpreted through established theoretical lenses from the HRM and organizational behavior literature, including internal labor markets, career development theory, and human capital perspectives. This process aligns with abductive reasoning, allowing empirical observations from the case to inform and refine existing theoretical assumptions while remaining grounded in the data (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

The abductive logic adopted in this study involved examining the data alongside relevant theory, allowing context-sensitive insights to emerge while refining existing understandings of internal mobility as a retention-oriented HRM practice (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), interpreting patterns through established HRM and organizational behavior frameworks. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. First, data triangulation across multiple document types reduced the risk of single-source bias (Denzin, 1978). The study adopted a reflexive stance, acknowledging the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis and avoiding causal claims that exceed the scope of the data. The study aims to contribute theoretically to the existence theory by providing insights into how internal mobility can function as a retention-oriented HRM strategy (Yin, 2018). Additionally, reliance on secondary data limits access to employee-level perceptions; however, this limitation is partially mitigated through the use of diverse and credible data sources.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Findings

IBM is a multinational technology corporation with a long-standing emphasis on workforce development and internal labor market practices. Over the past decade, IBM has increasingly shifted from traditional role-based HRM toward a skills-based workforce strategy, reflecting broader transformations in how organizations can manage talent under conditions of technological change and skill obsolescence (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2019). This transition aligns with the growing emphasis in the literature on internal labor markets as mechanisms for workforce adaptability and retention (Bidwell, 2011).

A central component of IBM's human capital strategy has been the development of internal mobility systems designed to match employee skills with evolving organizational needs. Rather than relying exclusively on hierarchical promotions, IBM has invested in internal talent marketplaces and skills frameworks that support lateral mobility, project-based assignments, and continuous reskilling. These practices are intended to improve the internal allocation of human capital and reduce dependence on external hiring in highly competitive labor markets.

IBM's approach to internal mobility reflects principles commonly associated with contemporary talent management systems, particularly those

emphasizing skills visibility, employability, and performance alignment. Research on internal labor markets suggests that such systems can enhance retention by increasing employees' access to internal opportunities and by signaling long-term investment in their development (DeVaro & Waldman, 2012). At the same time, IBM's model illustrates how internal mobility may extend beyond talent differentiation to facilitate learning and knowledge recombination across organizational units.

From a theoretical perspective, IBM's internal mobility practices can be interpreted through the lens of organizational learning and knowledge-based theories of the firm. Lateral moves and project-based mobility allow employees to accumulate organization-specific knowledge and to transfer tacit knowledge across functional boundaries, processes that are central to sustained organizational learning (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). These mechanisms are consistent with prior research suggesting that internal mobility supports not only performance outcomes but also broader learning capabilities by exposing employees to diverse tasks, teams, and perspectives (Campion et al., 1994).

Importantly, while IBM's internal mobility system is embedded within a skills-driven and performance-oriented talent management framework, its learning-related effects are not always explicitly theorized in the retention literature. This case, therefore, provides an opportunity to examine internal mobility not only as a mechanism for retaining high-value talent but also as a structural process through which organizations enable skill development, tacit knowledge circulation, and adaptive capacity over time.

4.2. Discussion

The findings of this case study underscore the strategic importance of internal mobility as a mechanism for employee retention within large, knowledge-intensive organizations. The IBM SkillsFirst HR model illustrates how structured internal mobility initiatives can move beyond traditional career progression frameworks and operate as a broader organizational capability that supports workforce stability, adaptability, and sustained performance.

Consistent with prior research, the case suggests that internal mobility may contribute to retention by expanding employees' perceived career opportunities within the organization. When employees are able to transition across roles, projects, or skill domains without exiting the firm, they may be less likely to seek external opportunities to satisfy career development needs. This aligns with findings where perceived internal career prospects were negatively associated with voluntary turnover intentions (Kraimer et al., 2011; Hausknecht et al., 2009). In this respect, internal mobility can function as a retention mechanism by reframing career advancement as an internal process. Beyond its role in retaining employees, the IBM case highlights internal mobility as a learning-oriented HR practice. The SkillsFirst approach emphasized skills portability, continuous reskilling, and lateral movement, suggesting that mobility can facilitate the circulation of knowledge and capabilities across organizational boundaries.

This perspective resonates with theoretical work on boundaryless and adjustable careers, which emphasize learning, adaptability, and the accumulation of transferable skills within dynamic organizational contexts (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). Rather than serving solely as a reward for high performers, internal mobility in this case appears to support broader organizational learning by enabling employees to acquire diverse experiences and apply tacit knowledge across functions. The findings also contribute to the ongoing debate on the relationship between internal mobility and talent management. While much of the existing literature frames internal mobility primarily as a tool for managing and retaining high performers, the IBM SkillsFirst model suggests a more inclusive logic. By prioritizing skills over formal credentials and hierarchical progression, the model supports mobility across a wider segment of the workforce. This may challenge performance-tiered assumptions embedded in traditional talent management systems and may support a more systemic understanding of retention, where value is generated through skill recombination and collaborative performance, rather than individual ranking alone.

From a strategic HRM perspective, the case reinforces the view that internal mobility is not merely an operational practice but a component of broader organizational capability building. The integration of digital skills platforms, transparent opportunity marketplaces, and skills-based role matching reflects an alignment between HR architecture and business strategy. This supports arguments in the strategic HRM literature, where HR practices are considered most effective when they are internally coherent and aligned with organizational goals related to innovation and long-term competitiveness (Wright & McMahan, 1992).

Internal mobility can serve multiple, interconnected functions: enhancing employee retention, supporting continuous learning, facilitating knowledge flow, and strengthening organizational adaptability. The IBM case provides support for conceptualizing internal mobility not only as a talent management instrument, but also as a learning and retention mechanism embedded within a skills-based HR system.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined internal mobility as a strategic retention mechanism through the case of IBM's SkillsFirst HR model. The findings support the growing body of literature suggesting that internal mobility can contribute to employee retention, organizational learning, and long-term workforce sustainability when embedded within effective HRM systems (Mehmood et al., 2025). However, the analysis also highlights several challenges that organizations must address to realize the full potential of internal mobility initiatives. Despite its strategic value, internal mobility is often constrained by structural, managerial, and cultural barriers. One significant challenge concerns the lack of transparency in internal labor markets. Employees frequently report limited awareness of available internal opportunities, unclear application processes, and insufficient information regarding required skills, which may reduce participation in internal mobility systems

(Bidwell, 2011). Another critical obstacle relates to managerial resistance. Line managers may be reluctant to release high-performing employees, particularly in performance-driven environments, leading to talent hoarding behaviors that can undermine internal mobility efforts and create inequities across organizational units (DeVaro & Waldman, 2012).

Additionally, incomplete or fragmented talent data can impede effective internal matching. Without accurate and dynamic visibility into employees' skills, career aspirations, and developmental trajectories, organizations tend to struggle to align internal supply with evolving role requirements (Kraimer et al., 2011). This challenge is particularly salient in large, knowledge-intensive organizations where skills evolve rapidly. Cultural stigma may also discourage employees from pursuing internal moves. In some organizational contexts, expressing interest in alternative roles may be perceived as a signal of disengagement or disloyalty, thereby suppressing mobility intentions even when opportunities exist (De Vos et al., 2020).

The literature and the IBM case jointly suggest several best practices for strengthening internal mobility systems. Organizations can benefit from establishing transparent internal labor markets, supported by digital platforms that clearly communicate opportunities, skill requirements, and mobility pathways (Bidwell, 2011). Aligning internal mobility with managerial incentives and performance metrics can reduce resistance and encourage leaders to view talent development as an organizational rather than unit-level responsibility (DeVaro & Waldman, 2012).

Effective internal mobility requires robust skills architectures that may integrate formal qualifications, experiential learning, and tacit knowledge and enable more accurate and equitable talent matching. At the same time, the breakdown of silos and the formation of new ideas can be a strong possibility (Kraimer et al., 2011; Bersin, 2019). This aligns internal mobility with broader learning and development strategies rather than positioning it solely as a reward mechanism for high performers. Finally, cultivating a mobility-supportive culture is essential. Normalizing lateral moves, project-based transitions, and role experimentation can reposition internal mobility as a legitimate learning strategy or a way of interpretation (De Vos et al., 2020; Greer & Egan, 2012; Stryker & Serpe, 1994).

This study is subject to several limitations. The reliance on a single case study restricts the generalizability of the findings (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). While IBM represents a theoretically rich and information-intensive context, internal mobility practices may differ substantially across organizational sizes, industries, and institutional environments, and the study is only based on secondary data sources. Future research would benefit from primary qualitative data, such as interviews or longitudinal designs, to capture how employees interpret and navigate internal mobility systems over time. Finally, future studies could further examine internal mobility not only as a retention mechanism but also as a collective learning process, exploring how mobility can contribute to knowledge diffusion, team performance, and organizational resilience beyond individual career outcomes.

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