

Employee Career Management in Culinary SMEs: A Qualitative Study in Yogyakarta

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how employee career management is practiced in culinary small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Yogyakarta, with particular attention to career development opportunities, informal learning, managerial support, career challenges, and employees' perceptions of career progression. This study employed a qualitative case study approach involving four culinary SMEs and 16 participants, consisting of four owners/managers and 12 employees. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and relevant documentation from January to April 2026. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through transcription, initial coding, categorization, theme development, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. Data trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation and member checking. Career development occurs through informal learning, daily work experience, managerial trust, and increased responsibilities rather than formal promotion systems. Participants perceived learning opportunities, trust, career development, and a positive work environment as factors supporting their willingness to remain with the organization. This study contributes to the understanding of employee career management in the SME context by highlighting how informal career practices operate in culinary SMEs. The findings demonstrate that career development can take place through everyday work experiences, informal learning, managerial trust, and responsibility expansion despite the absence of formal career structures.

INTRODUCTION

Employee career management has become an important issue for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly because employee development can influence organizational sustainability and retention. Unlike large organizations, SMEs often have simpler organizational structures and limited formal career systems. Consequently, career development may occur through informal learning, work experience, managerial support, and the gradual allocation of greater responsibilities. Kim (2026) emphasizes the role of organizational career management and informal learning in strengthening employees' career adaptability, while Basuki and Widyanti (2022) highlight the importance of organizational learning in supporting employee career development in SMEs.

In the culinary sector, employees play an important role in maintaining daily operations and service quality. However, opportunities for formal career advancement may be limited because many culinary SMEs have relatively small organizational structures. Previous studies have shown that career development, organizational support, training, and employment practices are associated with employee retention and performance in SMEs (Joo et al., 2025; Indrayani et al., 2025; Darshani & Surangi, 2025). This suggests that career management in SMEs needs to be understood not only through formal promotion systems but also through employees' everyday experiences and interactions with owners or managers.

Despite growing research on career development and employee retention in SMEs, limited attention has been given to how career management is actually practiced within culinary SMEs, particularly in the Indonesian context. Previous studies have examined organizational learning, career development resources, employee retention, and human resource practices, but the specific experiences of employees in culinary SMEs remain relatively underexplored (Basuki & Widyanti, 2022; Joo et al., 2025; Ativor & Chaichi, 2026). Therefore, a qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring employees' experiences, perceptions, and the managerial practices that shape their career development.

This study aims to explore how employee career management is practiced in culinary SMEs in Yogyakarta, with particular attention to career development opportunities, informal learning, managerial support, career challenges, and employees' perceptions of career progression. Based on this objective, the study addresses the following research questions:

Research Questions

RQ1: How is employee career management practiced in culinary SMEs in Yogyakarta?

RQ2: What factors support and constrain employee career development in culinary SMEs?

RQ3: How do employees perceive the role of career management in their decision to remain with the organization?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of career management practices in culinary SMEs and offer practical implications for SME owners and managers in developing and retaining their employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Career Management

Employee career management refers to the process through which individuals and organizations support and manage career development to achieve both individual and organizational objectives. Career management includes career planning, competency development, career exploration, performance feedback, and opportunities for career advancement (Greenhaus et al., 2018). Career management is therefore not solely an individual responsibility, as organizational support and managerial practices can influence employees' opportunities to develop their careers.

In the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), career management may differ from practices in larger organizations. SMEs generally have simpler organizational structures, fewer hierarchical positions, and limited formal human resource systems. Consequently, employee career development may occur through informal mechanisms such as work experience, learning from colleagues, mentoring, managerial support, and the gradual assignment of greater responsibilities. Kim (2026) emphasizes that organizational career management and informal learning can contribute to employees' career adaptability, indicating that career development does not always depend on formal career systems.

Career Development in SMEs

Career development is a continuous process through which employees acquire knowledge, skills, experience, and opportunities that support their professional growth. Career development can involve formal training, job rotation, mentoring, performance feedback, career planning, and opportunities to assume greater responsibilities.

In SMEs, organizational learning can play an important role in employee career development. Basuki and Widyanti (2022) demonstrate that organizational learning contributes to the development of employee careers in SMEs. Learning may take place through formal programs as well as through employees' daily experiences and interactions within the workplace. This is particularly relevant for SMEs where limited resources may restrict the implementation of formal career development programs.

Joo et al. (2025) further highlight that career development resources in SMEs can influence employees' perceptions of their employment experiences. The availability of development opportunities, organizational support, and career-related resources can shape how employees perceive their prospects within the organization. Therefore, SMEs may support career development not only through formal promotion structures but also by providing opportunities for learning, skill development, and increased responsibility.

Informal Learning and Employee Experience

Informal learning represents learning that occurs through everyday work experiences, interactions, observation, problem-solving, and knowledge sharing rather than through structured training programs. Informal learning is particularly relevant in SMEs because employees often acquire competencies directly through workplace activities.

Kim (2026) identifies informal learning as an important factor associated with career adaptability in SMEs. Through informal learning, employees can develop new competencies and adapt to changing job requirements. In culinary SMEs, informal learning may include learning food preparation techniques, improving customer service, understanding inventory management, operating digital ordering platforms, or learning supervisory responsibilities from more experienced colleagues.

Employee experience is also important in understanding career development within SMEs. Employees may perceive career progression through changes in their responsibilities, recognition from managers, increased trust, and opportunities to perform more complex tasks. Thus, career development in SMEs may be reflected not only in formal promotions but also in the accumulation of experience and competencies over time.

Managerial Support and Career Opportunities

Managerial support is an important element of career management because managers and business owners can influence employees' access to learning, feedback, recognition, and career opportunities. In SMEs, the relationship between managers and employees can be particularly influential because organizational structures are relatively small and interactions are often more direct.

Basuki and Widyanti (2022) emphasize the importance of organizational learning in supporting employee career development, while Darshani and Surangi (2025) highlight the relevance of leadership, trust, and internal career development in employee retention. These findings suggest that managerial relationships can shape employees' perceptions of career opportunities.

Managerial trust may also influence the assignment of greater responsibilities. Employees who demonstrate competence, reliability, and commitment may receive additional responsibilities, which can become an informal pathway for career development. In this sense, career opportunities in SMEs may emerge through everyday managerial decisions rather than through standardized promotion systems.

Career Management and Employee Retention

Employee retention refers to an organization's ability to retain employees and reduce voluntary employee turnover. Career development is frequently associated with employee retention because employees may be more willing to remain in organizations where they perceive opportunities for learning, growth, recognition, and career progression.

Joo et al. (2025) indicate that career development resources are an important aspect of employees' experiences in SMEs. Similarly, Ativor and Chaichi (2026) identify employee development and career progression as relevant issues in understanding employee retention and organizational resilience in SMEs. Research on Indonesian MSMEs also indicates that human resource practices, employee development, and job-related factors can influence employee performance and organizational outcomes (Indrayani et al., 2025).

Career management may therefore contribute to retention through two interconnected mechanisms. First, career development enables employees to increase their competencies and professional capabilities. Second, opportunities for development may strengthen employees' perceptions that the organization provides a future for their careers. However, the specific mechanisms through which career management influences retention may differ according to the organizational context and characteristics of SMEs.

Career Management in Culinary SMEs

Culinary SMEs have distinctive characteristics because their employees are directly involved in operational activities, customer service, teamwork, and service quality. Employees may develop their careers through progressive responsibilities, such as moving from entry-level operational roles to senior staff, team leader, supervisor, or managerial positions.

However, the relatively small organizational structure of culinary SMEs may limit the availability of formal hierarchical career paths. Consequently, career management may be practiced through informal learning, work experience, managerial trust, recognition, mentoring, and increased responsibilities. These practices may provide employees with opportunities to develop their competencies even when formal career planning and promotion systems are limited.

The culinary context is therefore important for understanding how career management is practiced in SMEs. Employees' career experiences may be shaped not only by formal organizational policies but also by daily interactions with owners, managers, supervisors, and colleagues. Exploring these experiences can provide a deeper understanding of how career management operates in small-scale culinary businesses.

Research Gap

Previous studies have examined employee career development, organizational learning, career development resources, managerial support, and employee retention in SMEs (Basuki & Widyanti, 2022; Joo et al., 2025; Kim, 2026). Other studies have also examined employee retention and organizational resilience through qualitative approaches (Darshani & Surangi, 2025; Ativor & Chaichi, 2026). However, limited attention has been given to how employee career management is experienced and practiced specifically within culinary SMEs, particularly in the Indonesian context.

Furthermore, existing studies tend to emphasize career development resources, organizational learning, or retention outcomes, while less attention is given to the everyday processes through which employees experience career development, such as informal learning, managerial trust, increased responsibility, and direct interaction with business owners. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring employee career management practices in culinary SMEs in Yogyakarta.

The present study focuses on how career management is experienced by employees, how managers support career development, what opportunities and challenges employees encounter, and how career management is perceived in relation to employees' intention to remain in the organization. A qualitative approach is employed to capture the experiences and perspectives of both employees and SME managers in greater depth.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore employee career management in culinary SMEs in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The study involved four culinary SMEs and 16 participants, consisting of four owners/managers and 12 employees. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct experience with employee management and career development. Employees had at least one year of work experience in the selected SMEs.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and relevant documentation during January to April 2026. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and focused on career development opportunities, informal learning, managerial support, increased responsibilities, career challenges, and perceptions of career progression. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized using participant codes.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through transcription, initial coding, categorization, theme development, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, when additional interviews no longer generated substantially new themes.

Data trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation by comparing information from owners/managers and employees, as well as interview findings with observations and documentation. Member checking was also conducted to confirm selected interpretations. Ethical principles were maintained through voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymization of participants and organizations.

RESEARCH RESULT

Employee Career Management Practices in Culinary SMEs

The interview findings indicate that employee career management in the selected culinary SMEs was primarily conducted through informal practices. Participants reported that career development was generally not supported by formally written career paths or standardized promotion procedures. Instead, career progression was associated with employees' work experience, daily performance, managerial trust, and increased responsibilities.

Several participants described the absence of formal career paths within their organizations. As stated by the owner of SME A:

*"We do not have a formally written career path. Usually, when employees have worked for a long time and demonstrate good abilities, we give them greater responsibilities."
(O1, Owner, SME A)"*

Similarly, the owner of SME B explained:

"There are no specific rules for promotion. We look at their daily performance, discipline, and whether they can be trusted." (O2, Owner, SME B)

From the employee perspective, career development was also experienced through the gradual expansion of responsibilities. One cashier explained:

"At first, I was just a regular cashier. After some time, I was trusted to help arrange employee schedules and check sales reports." (E2, Cashier, SME A)

Another participant emphasized the importance of work experience in obtaining greater responsibilities:

*"Career development here is mostly based on experience. When someone becomes capable and can lead their colleagues, we usually give them additional responsibilities."
(E8, Supervisor, SME C).*

The interview data were then coded into several categories, as presented in Table 1

Table 1
Employee Career Management Practices in Culinary SMEs

Key Evidence	Interview	Initial Code	Category	Main Theme
No formally written career path		No formal career path	Informal career system	Informal Career Management
Promotion based on daily performance and discipline		Performance-based consideration	Managerial assessment	Informal Career Management
Long-serving employees receive greater responsibilities		Increased responsibility	Career opportunity	Informal Career Management
Career development based on experience		Experience-based development	Work experience	Informal Career Management
Employees are trusted to arrange schedules and check sales reports		Managerial trust	Increased responsibility	Career Opportunity

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that career management in the selected culinary SMEs was predominantly informal. Rather than following predetermined career paths, employees developed their careers through accumulated work experience, demonstrated performance, managerial trust, and the gradual expansion of responsibilities. In this context, career progression was not necessarily reflected in formal changes in job titles but could also be experienced through greater responsibilities and broader work roles.

This finding is consistent with Greenhaus et al. (2018), who conceptualize career management as a process involving career planning and career development. However, the findings suggest that the implementation of career management in SMEs may take a less formal form because of their relatively simple organizational structures. Career development may instead emerge through everyday managerial practices and employees' accumulated work experiences. The finding also supports Kim (2026), who emphasizes the importance of organizational career management and informal learning in supporting employees' career adaptability. In the context of culinary SMEs, informal career management can therefore be understood as a process in which employees gradually develop their capabilities and responsibilities through workplace experience, performance recognition, and managerial trust.

Overall, the findings suggest that informal career management is a central characteristic of employee career development in the selected culinary SMEs. The absence of formal career paths does not necessarily mean that career development is absent. Instead, career development appears to occur through everyday work practices, recognition of employee capabilities, and the gradual assignment of greater responsibilities.

Informal Learning and Competency Development

Informal learning emerged as an important mechanism of employee development. Employees reported that they acquired new knowledge and skills through direct work experience, observation, guidance from senior employees, and involvement in more complex tasks.

Table 2
Informal Learning and Competency Development

Key Interview Evidence	Initial Code	Category	Main Theme
Learning from senior employees	Peer learning	Informal learning	Informal Learning
Learning to prepare new menu items	Learning by doing	Workplace learning	Informal Learning
Learning inventory management from	Skill expansion	Competency development	Informal Learning

experienced colleagues			
Employees involved in more complex tasks	Learning through responsibility	Experiential learning	Competency Development

Informal learning emerged as an important mechanism for employee development. Employees reported acquiring knowledge and skills through direct work experience, observation, guidance from senior employees, and involvement in various work activities.

E1 Kitchen Staff, SME A: "I learned a lot from senior employees. At first, I only prepared ingredients, but eventually I was taught how to prepare certain menu items."

E4 Kitchen Staff, SME B: "There is no specific training every month. Usually, when there is a new menu, we are directly taught by senior employees or the owner."

E7 Barista, SME C: "I learned how to make drinks from a more experienced colleague. After I became proficient, I was also taught how to manage inventory and open the store."

O3 Manager, SME C: "We mostly use a learning-by-doing system. If an employee learns quickly, we involve them in more complex tasks."

These statements indicate that learning in culinary SMEs primarily takes place through learning by doing, peer learning, and direct guidance from management.

This finding is consistent with Kim (2026), who emphasizes the role of informal learning in employees' career adaptability. It also supports Basuki and Widyanti (2022), who demonstrate the importance of organizational learning in employee career development in SMEs.

Managerial Support, Trust, and Career Opportunities

The findings also indicate that managerial support and trust are important factors in providing employees with additional responsibilities and career development opportunities.

Table 3
Managerial Support and Trust

Key Interview Evidence	Initial Code	Category	Main Theme
Employees receive more responsibility after gaining the owner's trust	Managerial trust	Managerial support	Trust and Support
Employees are trusted to handle cash and inventory	Delegated responsibility	Career opportunity	Managerial Support
Employees receive opportunities to learn other tasks	Learning opportunity	Development support	Career Development
Employees can request to learn another position	Employee initiative	Managerial support	Career Opportunity

O4 Owner, SME D: *“When an employee has worked for a long time and I trust them, I usually give them more responsibility. For example, handling cash, managing inventory, or helping supervise other employees.”*

E10 Cashier, SME D: *“At first, I only handled customer payments. Now I am also trusted to prepare sales recaps and help the owner review daily sales.”*

E12 Senior Staff, SME D: *“I think trust is important. Once the owner trusts us, we can be given opportunities to learn other tasks.”*

E6 Service Staff, SME B:

“The owner is quite open when we want to learn. When I said that I wanted to learn the cashier position, I was given the opportunity to try it.”

The findings indicate that trust functions as an informal mechanism of career development. Rather than relying solely on formal promotion criteria, managers assess employees based on reliability, performance, commitment, and readiness to accept greater responsibilities.

This finding is relevant to Darshani and Surangi (2025), who emphasize the importance of leadership and trust in employee retention and internal career development.

Career Opportunities through Increased Responsibility

Participants described career progression primarily through changes in responsibilities rather than formal changes in job titles.

Table 4
Career Progression through Increased Responsibility

Key Evidence	Interview	Initial Code	Category	Main Theme
Service staff begin guiding new employees		Mentoring responsibility	Responsibility expansion	Career Advancement
Cashier becomes responsible for closing and cash reconciliation		Financial responsibility	Job enrichment	Career Advancement
Barista becomes responsible for shift arrangements		Supervisory responsibility	Responsibility expansion	Career Advancement
Senior staff are given additional tasks before formal promotion		Expanded role	Informal advancement	Career Development

E3 Service Staff, SME A: *“I have not received a formal promotion, but my responsibilities have increased. Now I sometimes help guide new employees.”*

E5 Cashier, SME B: *“Now I am trusted to close the cashier at the end of the day and count the money. Before, I only handled customer payments.”*

E8 Supervisor, SME C: *“I started as a barista. After several years, I was given responsibility for arranging shifts and helping evaluate my colleagues' work.”*

E12 Senior Staff, SME D: *“Here, development does not necessarily mean getting a new position immediately. Sometimes the responsibilities increase first.”*

These findings indicate that career development in culinary SMEs can occur through expanded responsibilities. Employees may experience professional development even when their formal job titles remain unchanged.

This finding extends the concept of career management proposed by Greenhaus et al. (2018), which suggests that career development includes acquiring skills, experiences, and opportunities that support career growth. It also reinforces Basuki and Widyanti (2022), who emphasize organizational learning as one mechanism of employee career development in SMEs.

Career Development Challenges in Culinary SMEs

Although development opportunities exist, employees also identified several limitations related to the small organizational structure.

Table 5
Career Development Challenges

Key Interview Evidence	Initial Code	Category	Main Theme
Employees are uncertain about available career positions	Unclear career path	Career limitation	Career Challenges
Formal promotion opportunities are limited	Limited promotion	Structural constraint	Career Challenges
Few managerial positions are available	Limited hierarchy	Organizational constraint	Career Challenges
Development occurs through additional tasks rather than promotion	Non-formal advancement	Informal career path	Career Challenges

E1 Kitchen Staff, SME A: "Sometimes I am also unsure about what position I can develop into because there are not many people working here."

E6 Service Staff, SME B: "Formal promotion opportunities are limited. At most, you can become a senior employee or be trusted to supervise colleagues."

O2 Owner, SME B: "Because our business is still small, there are not many managerial positions. Therefore, not every employee can have a new position."

E9 Kitchen Staff, SME D: "There are opportunities, but they are not always in the form of promotion. More often, we are given additional tasks or opportunities to learn other areas."

These findings indicate that the limited organizational structure of SMEs can constrain formal career development. However, these limitations do not necessarily eliminate career development opportunities, as employees can continue to develop through additional responsibilities and learning opportunities.

This finding is consistent with Joo et al. (2025), particularly regarding the availability and perceptions of career development resources in SMEs.

Employee Career Management and Retention

The final theme examines how employees perceive career development opportunities in relation to their willingness to remain with the organization. The interviews indicate that opportunities to learn, receive greater responsibilities, gain recognition, and develop competencies were perceived by participants as important aspects of their employment experience. However, participants also acknowledged other factors, such as salary and the work environment, in considering whether to remain with the organization.

Table 6
Career Management and Employee Retention

Key Interview Evidence	Initial Code	Category	Main Theme
Employee stays because of trust and learning opportunities	Growth opportunity	Employee experience	Retention
Increased responsibility creates a sense of development	Career growth	Career experience	Retention
Employee remains because of trust and learning opportunities	Organizational attachment	Retention factor	Retention
Work environment and development opportunities are important	Work environment	Employee satisfaction	Retention

The interview findings illustrate how participants perceived career development as one factor supporting their willingness to remain. E2 stated:

E2, Cashier, SME A: "I am still here because I feel trusted and I can continue learning new things."

Similarly, E4 associated increased responsibilities and learning opportunities with a sense of personal development:

E4, Kitchen Staff, SME B: "When there are opportunities to learn and our responsibilities increase, it feels like we are developing. That makes me want to continue working here."

E7 also emphasized the importance of trust and learning opportunities in their decision to remain:

E7, Barista, SME C: "I have thought about looking for another job, but here I am trusted and I can learn many things."

However, career development was not the only consideration. E11 highlighted the importance of the work environment alongside development opportunities:

E11, Service Staff, SME D: "Besides salary, I think the work environment and opportunities for development are also important."

The manager's perspective also supported the perception that employee development may be associated with employees' willingness to remain:

O3, Manager, SME C: "When employees feel that they are developing, they usually stay longer. Employees who have worked here for a long time are also easier to trust with important responsibilities."

Taken together, the findings suggest that participants perceived career development opportunities as one factor that encouraged them to remain with the organization. Learning opportunities, managerial trust, recognition, and increased responsibilities contributed to employees' perceptions of growth. Nevertheless, retention decisions were not attributed solely to career development, as participants also considered salary and the work environment.

This interpretation is consistent with Joo et al. (2025), who highlight the relevance of career development resources to employees' experiences in SMEs. It also aligns with Ativor and Chaichi (2026), who identify employee development and career progression as relevant considerations in understanding employee retention in SMEs. The present study extends this discussion by showing how employees in culinary SMEs perceive career development through everyday experiences, learning opportunities, trust, and increased responsibilities.

Cross-Theme Interpretation of Employee Career Management

To integrate the findings, the major themes identified from the interview data are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7
Cross-Theme Interpretation of Employee Career Management

Theme	Empirical Pattern	Interpretation
Informal Career Management	No formal career path; development based on experience and performance	Career management operates through informal organizational practices
Informal Learning	Learning from senior employees and daily work	Workplace experience functions as a major source of career development
Managerial Trust and Support	Employees receive greater opportunities after gaining trust	Trust functions as an informal mechanism for providing career opportunities
Increased Responsibility	Employees receive more complex tasks and broader responsibilities	Responsibility expansion represents an informal form of career advancement
Structural Career Constraints	Limited managerial positions and formal promotion opportunities	Small organizational structures restrict conventional career progression

Career Development and Retention	Learning, trust, and growth are perceived as important aspects of employees' work experience	Career development opportunities are perceived by employees as factors supporting their willingness to remain
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The cross-theme interpretation indicates that employee career management in culinary SMEs is characterized by an informal, experience-based, and relationship-oriented process. Employees initially develop their capabilities through daily work experiences and informal learning. As their competence and reliability become recognized, owners or managers provide greater trust and opportunities to assume additional responsibilities. These experiences create opportunities for career development despite the absence of formal career structures.

The findings further suggest that career development is perceived by employees as one factor supporting their willingness to remain with the organization. However, this perception should not be interpreted as a direct causal relationship between career management and employee retention. Participants also identified other considerations, such as salary and the work environment, when describing their decision to remain with the organization.

Overall, the cross-theme interpretation demonstrates that career management in culinary SMEs is not necessarily dependent on formal promotion systems. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of work experience, informal learning, managerial trust, increased responsibility, and perceived career development opportunities. This provides an important contextual understanding of how career management operates within small culinary businesses in Yogyakarta.

Interpretive Model of Employee Career Management

Based on the findings, the employee career management process can be represented as follows:



The model suggests that career management in culinary SMEs may occur through an informal and experience-based process. Employees develop their competencies through everyday work experience and informal learning. As their abilities and reliability become recognized, management provides greater trust and opportunities to assume additional responsibilities. These experiences are associated with employees' perceptions of career development and their willingness to remain with the organization.

The model illustrates the interpretive pattern emerging from the interview findings. It summarizes how work experience, informal learning, managerial trust and support, increased responsibility, and perceived career development are interconnected within employees' career experiences in culinary SMEs. The model does not imply a causal relationship between the identified themes.

Overall, this study contributes to understanding how employee career management operates within the specific context of culinary SMEs in Yogyakarta. While previous studies have emphasized organizational learning, career development resources, and employee retention in SMEs (Basuki & Widyanti, 2022; Joo et al., 2025; Kim, 2026), this study highlights career development experiences through everyday work practices, managerial relationships, informal learning, and increased responsibilities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored employee career management practices in culinary SMEs in Yogyakarta using a qualitative case study approach. The findings indicate that employee career management is predominantly informal, experience-based, and relationship-oriented. Rather than relying on formal career paths and standardized promotion procedures, career development takes place through daily work experience, informal learning, managerial trust, and the gradual assignment of greater responsibilities.

Informal learning emerged as an important mechanism for employee development. Employees developed their competencies through learning by doing, guidance from senior employees, and opportunities to perform more complex tasks. Managerial trust and support also played an important role in providing employees with opportunities to expand their responsibilities and develop new competencies.

The findings further indicate that career progression in culinary SMEs is not necessarily reflected through formal promotion or changes in job titles. Instead, employees may experience career advancement through increased responsibilities, broader work roles, and greater managerial trust. At the same time, the small organizational structure of SMEs creates limitations in terms of formal promotion and the availability of managerial positions.

Regarding employee retention, participants perceived career development opportunities, trust, learning, and a positive work environment as important aspects of their employment experience and as factors supporting their willingness to remain with the organization. However, the findings do not suggest a direct causal relationship between career management and retention, as employees also considered other factors such as salary and the work environment.

Overall, this study highlights that employee career management in culinary SMEs can operate effectively through informal mechanisms despite the absence of formal career systems. The study contributes to the understanding of career management in the SME context by showing how work experience, informal learning, managerial trust, increased responsibility, and perceived career development opportunities shape employees' career experiences in culinary businesses.

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