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Sustainable and Culturally Innovative Approaches to Entrepreneurial Talent Management in Indian Start-ups

S. Nithya Priya[1] and S. Kowsalyadevi[2*]

[1]Department of Management, Cherraans Arts Science College, Thittuparai, Kangeyam, Tiruppur - 638701, Tamil Nadu, India

[2]Department of Digital Marketing and Data Mining, Kangeyam Institute of Commerce, Nathakadaiyur, Kangeyam, Tiruppur - 638108, Tamil Nadu, India; kowsalyadevimba@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study investigates how cultural values, innovation, and sustainable business practices shape the way Indian startups attract, develop, and retain entrepreneurial talent. With startups becoming a vital part of India's economic growth, the ability to effectively manage and sustain skilled professionals has gained greater importance. Data for this research were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed among 207 employees working in various startups across Tamil Nadu. The study examined six key dimensions - cultural alignment, innovation, sustainability, talent attraction, talent development, and talent retention- by applying Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to assess the direct and indirect links among them. The analysis indicated that culture, innovation, and sustainability play a significant role in building and maintaining a strong talent base, with cultural alignment having the greatest impact on retaining employees. Innovation encourages continuous skill development, while sustainability embedded in company practices enhances employee motivation and sense of belonging. The results provide meaningful guidance for startup founders, Human Resources (HR) professionals, and policy-makers aiming to create inclusive, forward-looking, and sustainable workplaces that promote long-term employee loyalty within India's evolving startup ecosystem.

Keywords: Capital Management, Creative Practices, Entrepreneurship, Organisational Culture, Start- up Ecosystem, Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

In the era of a fast-moving world with technological global competition, startups and disruption have developed as magnificent engines facilitating innovation, job creation and economic development. In India, particularly in regions like Tamil Nadu, the startup ecosystem has extended beyond assumptions in the past decade. Supportive policies, digital infrastructure, a growing talent pool and access to skilled professionals have created productive ground for entrepreneurial ventures[1]. Though the success of these startups depends not only on innovative products or funding matters, a startup's real edge often lies in how well it manages its people, especially entrepreneurial talent, through flexible, values-driven, and sustainable strategies.

Entrepreneurial talent management goes beyond traditional Human Resources. It is about recognising, attracting, nurturing, and retaining individuals who are not only creative but also eager to adapt, take initiative, and thrive in uncertainty[2]. Unlike larger corporations, startups operate within less formalised structures, where employees often take on multiple roles and work in closed spaces, leaner teams with multiple responsibilities. As a result, in such an environment, managing talent becomes a critical determining factor of both short-term performance and long-term survival[3].

Organisational culture powerfully plays a key role in the talent management process. Cultural values ensure that employees resonate with the organisation's core values and purpose. Research suggests that startups with strong cultural cohesion are well situated to build trust,

*Author for correspondence

reduce attrition, and adopt collaborative innovation[4]. Additionally, innovative human resource practices - not just in product development - are gaining importance, with flexible work arrangements, continuous learning, and decentralised decision-making becoming just as critical as tools to enhance employee satisfaction and performance[5].

At the same time, the integration of sustainability is also a core part of how talent perceives the long-term value of working with emerging ventures. A growing number of startups are implementing Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices into their culture and operations, not only for compliance but also because core identity drivers are increasingly appealing to purpose-driven professionals[6].

Consequently, the workforce becomes more aware of ethical and conservation values, and startups must align their talent strategies with these evolving expectations. In such a competitive and dynamic nature of the startup space, particularly in India's urban and semi-urban startup hubs, there is an urgent need to understand how cultural alignment, innovation, and sustainability intersect to shape talent management. Taking a multidimensional approach to managing entrepreneurial talent is no longer optional. It is a strategic obligation for building adaptive and future-ready businesses.

2. Review of Literature

Shafique[7] examined that the talent landscape in startups has undergone a significant transformation. This shift was largely influenced by the pace of technological disruption, the evolving entrepreneurial ecosystems, and the changing priorities of younger professionals. As a result, it needs more than just a standard hiring process. They required talent strategies that focus on shared values, encourage innovation, and integrate sustainable thinking into daily operations. Djaganata and Pusparini[8] emphasised that employees experiencing high person-organisation fit were more likely to remain committed even in uncertain or under-resourced conditions. Goncalves *et al.*[9] found that cultural congruence in digital startups improved not only retention but also collaborative innovation. In parallel, Presbitero *et al.*,[10] highlighted that leadership's cultural intelligence significantly enhanced team-level trust and value alignment, contributing to long-term talent stability. Yaqoob *et al.*,[11] stated that innovation-focused work environments tend to support psychological safety, encourage experimentation, and reduce the fear of failure - conditions necessary for sustaining talent in uncertain contexts. Similarly, Loor-Zambrano *et al.*,[12] pointed out the role of ethical sustainability in building employee trust and commitment, noting that sustainability functions as an intrinsic motivator. Elshaer *et al.*,[13] further underscored that green practices and sustainability were now perceived by employees as a sign of long-term job stability and corporate integrity. Andruszkiewicz *et al.*,[14] observed that startups adopting socially responsible strategies not only attracted values-driven professionals but also positioned themselves competitively in employer branding indexes. Sulastri[15] highlighted cultural mismatches as one of the core barriers to scalable HR practices in India's growing entrepreneurial space, advocating for culturally responsive talent frameworks. Tyagi[16], in the Culture-Engagement-Retention Loop, posited that cultural alignment triggers engagement, which then influences retention. These models were instrumental in providing a systemic understanding of talent dynamics, especially in complex and fluid environments like startups. Most previous studies had examined culture, innovation, and sustainability separately, without exploring their combined impact on entrepreneurial talent management. Research on startups, especially in emerging markets like India, remains limited compared to studies on large corporations. This study fills that gap by analysing how cultural alignment, innovation, and sustainability together influence talent management in Indian start-ups.

3. Objectives

To address the identified gap, this study sets out a series of clear research objectives:

1. To examine the influence of cultural alignment, innovation, and sustainability on entrepreneurial talent attraction, development, and retention in Indian start-ups.
2. To investigate how talent development mediates the relationship between innovation and talent retention.
3. To assess whether cultural alignment moderates the relationship between sustainability and talent retention.
4. To propose and validate a comprehensive conceptual framework integrating cultural, innovative, and sustainable dimensions of talent management in startup environments.

5. To offer evidence-based insights that help founders and HR practitioners in Indian startups build long-term, value-driven talent strategies.

4. Hypotheses

Based on the above objectives and the theoretical foundations established in the literature, the following hypotheses have been formulated.

- H1: Cultural alignment has a significant positive influence on talent attraction in Indian startups.
- H2: Cultural alignment positively affects talent development.
- H3: Cultural alignment significantly contributes to talent retention.
- H4: Innovation has a significant positive effect on talent attraction.
- H5: Innovation positively influences talent development.
- H6: Innovation has a significant positive relationship with talent retention.
- H7: Sustainability positively influences talent attraction.
- H8: Sustainability has a significant positive effect on talent development.
- H9: Sustainability significantly contributes to talent retention.
- H10: Talent attraction positively influences talent retention.
- H11: Talent development significantly predicts talent retention.
- H12: Talent development mediates the relationship between innovation and talent retention.

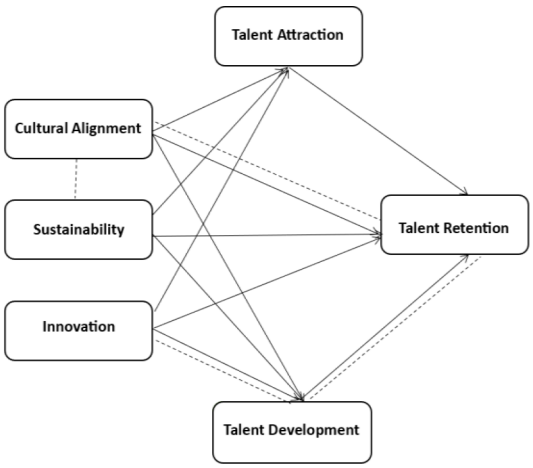


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

- H13: Cultural alignment moderates the relationship between sustainability and talent retention.

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model of the research, clarifying the associations among the variables (constructs) under investigation.

5. Research Methodology

A quantitative survey was conducted among employees from various startup sectors in Tamil Nadu using a structured questionnaire distributed online. The questionnaire included demographic details and items measuring six main constructs -cultural alignment, innovation, sustainability, and talent attraction, development, and retention on a five-point Likert scale. Out of over 500 surveys, 207 valid responses were analysed using SEM to test the proposed relationships and validate the research framework. The study sample comprised 207 employees from different start-ups across Tamil Nadu, India. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to assess the measurement model, and relevant fit indices were reported.

6. Data Analysis and Results

6.1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

The Demographic profile Table 1 indicates that 52.2% are male and 47.8% are female, showing a balanced gender mix. Most participants are young professionals aged between 20 and 30 years, and 59.4% have postgraduate qualifications. The majority (37.7%) have 1–3 years of work experience, indicating an early-career workforce (27.6%), while a smaller group (18.8%) has over six years of experience. Most respondents work in technology (31.9%), education (20.3%), and healthcare startups (16.4%), with nearly 78% based in urban areas such as Chennai, Coimbatore, and Tiruppur.

6.2 Measurement Model

A CFA has been conducted to test the reliability and validity of six key constructs - cultural alignment, innovation, sustainability, and talent attraction, development, and retention. Table 2 presents the measurement model. It shows all factor loadings are above 0.65, indicating acceptable measurement quality and internal consistency

Table 1. Demographic profile

N=207			
Demographic Variable	**Category**	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
Gender	Male	108	52.2
	Female	99	47.8
Age Group	20–25 years	62	30.0
	26–30 years	79	38.2
	31–35 years	42	20.3
	Above 35 years	24	11.5
Educational Qualification	Graduate	54	26.1
	Postgraduate	123	59.4
	Others	30	14.5
Job Experience	Less than 1 year	33	15.9
	1–3 years	78	37.7
	4–6 years	57	27.6
	More than 6 years	39	18.8
Sector of Startup	Technology	66	31.9
	Healthcare	34	16.4
	Education	42	20.3
	Finance	27	13.0
	Others	38	18.4
Work Location	Urban	161	77.8
	Semi-Urban/Rural	46	22.2

Source: Primary Data

is calculated. From Table 3, Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.81 to 0.88, confirming internal consistency, while Composite Reliability scores exceeded 0.89, ensuring construct stability. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are all above 0.50, showing good convergent validity. Overall, the measurement model proved statistically sound and well-aligned with the study's theoretical framework.

6.3 Model Fit Measures

To evaluate the suitability of the proposed structural model, several model fit indices are analysed, including X^2/df, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR, as shown in Table 4. The results meet accepted thresholds (X^2/df < 3, CFI and TLI > 0.90, RMSEA and SRMR < 0.08), confirming a good model fit. Table 5 presents the HTMT analysis results, where all values are below 0.85, indicating strong discriminant validity among constructs. Although a few values are close to the upper limit, they remained acceptable, showing that the constructs are related but distinct. Overall, these findings confirm the model's reliability and validity for further hypothesis testing.

6.4 Structural Model Assessment

The structural model assessment highlights several statistically significant relationships among the latent constructs. Talent Attraction (ATT), Cultural Alignment (CUL), Talent Development (DEV), Innovation (INN), and Sustainability (SUS) all show positive and significant effects on Talent Retention (RET). Among them, DEV has the strongest direct impact on retention ($\beta = 0.7867$, $p < .001$), followed by INN ($\beta = 0.6884$, $p < .001$), CUL ($\beta = 0.6725$, $p < .001$), and ATT ($\beta = 0.6018$, $p < .001$). SUS also significantly influenced retention, although with a relatively lower effect size ($\beta = 0.4281$, $p = .023$).

In addition, INN, CUL, and SUS significantly contributed to ATT, with INN having the highest impact ($\beta = 0.6399$, $p < .001$), followed by CUL ($\beta = 0.6940$, $p < .001$), and SUS ($\beta = 0.5771$, $p < .001$). Similarly, ATT was

Table 2. Measurement model

Construct	Item Code	Item Description (Abbreviated)	Loading
Cultural Alignment	CU1	Organisational values reflect mine	0.76
	CU2	Strong team cultural fit	0.73
	CU3	Shared mission	0.78
	CU4	Individual values respected	0.70
	CU5	Cultural practices support inclusion	0.82
	CU6	Collaboration is value-driven	0.67
Sustainability	SU1	Practices are environmentally responsible	0.78
	SU2	Long-term sustainable vision	0.71
	SU3	Social responsibility in daily work	0.73
	SU4	Ethical policies followed	0.82
	SU5	Stakeholder well-being periodized	0.68
	SU6	Integrated Sustainability	0.78
Innovation	IN1	Encouraged to try new ideas	0.78
	IN2	Creative thinking supported	0.77
	IN3	Risk-taking is welcome	0.70
	IN4	Encouraged team innovation	0.83
	IN5	Leaders encourage innovation	0.78
	IN6	Integrated Innovation	0.81
Talent Attraction	TA1	Attracted by the organisation's mission	0.75
	TA2	Job role with personal goals aligned	0.69
	TA3	Career growth opportunities	0.67
	TA4	Positive reputation	0.74
	TA5	Values impact joining decision	0.73
Talent Development	TD1	Access to learning resources	0.72
	TD2	Mentoring and support	0.75
	TD3	Skill development encouraged	0.81
	TD4	Feedback for improvement	0.62
	TD5	Training programs are impactful	0.75
	TD6	Career progression supported	0.72
Talent Retention	TR1	Plan to stay long-term	0.71
	TR2	Emotionally connected	0.78
	TR3	Recognised for work	0.76
	TR4	Rarely consider leaving	0.70
	TR5	Retention efforts observed	0.77

significantly predicted by INN ($\beta = 0.6432$, $p < .001$), CUL ($\beta = 0.6187$, $p < .001$), and SUS ($\beta = 0.5802$, $p < .001$). These findings confirm the strength of the hypothesised relationships and support the model's validity. Path coefficients and p-values are summarised in Table 6.

6.5 Assessment of the Hypothesised Model

As predicted, all findings aligned well with the theoretical expectations. Results analysed from Table 6 and Figure 2 (Path Model) show that the proposed model is tested, and the results provide strong empirical support for the

Table 3. Construct reliability validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Cultural Alignment	0.844	0.894	0.864
Innovation	0.853	0.897	0.884
Sustainability	0.855	0.898	0.886
Talent Attraction	0.844	0.894	0.870
Talent Development	0.839	0.892	0.861
Talent Retention	0.812	0.897	0.881

Table 4. Fit measures

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold
CFI	0.951	> 0.90
TLI	0.944	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.048	< 0.08
SRMR	0.051	< 0.08
χ^2/df	1.87	< 3.00

Table 5. Discriminant validity

Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio of Correlations						
	DEV	**INN**	**SUS**	**RET**	**ATT**	**CUL**
DEV	1	-	-	-	-	-
INN	0.618	1	-	-	-	-
SUS	0.521	0.612	1	-	-	-
RET	0.806	0.545	0.508	1	-	-
ATT	0.841	0.768	0.706	0.822	1	-
CUL	0.583	0.635	0.616	0.68	0.533	1

Table 6. Structural model results

Dep	Pred	β	p
RET	**ATT**	0.6018	<.001
RET	**CUL**	0.6725	<.001
RET	**DEV**	0.7867	<.001
RET	**INN**	0.6884	<.001
RET	**SUS**	0.4281	0.023
DEV	**INN**	0.6399	<.001
DEV	**CUL**	0.694	<.001
DEV	**SUS**	0.5771	<.001
ATT	**INN**	0.6432	<.001
ATT	**CUL**	0.6187	<.001
ATT	**SUS**	0.5802	<.001

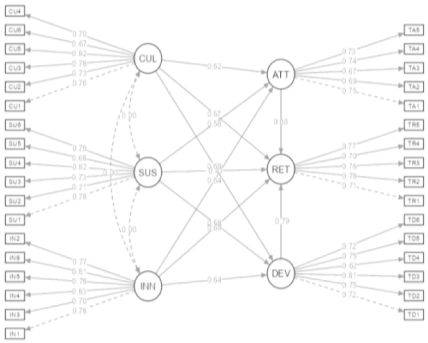


Figure 2. Path model.

majority of the hypotheses. Hypothesis H1, which proposes that CUL positively influences ATT, is supported (β = 0.62, p < .001), indicating that when employees resonate with organisational values, they are more expected to be attracted to the startup. Hypothesis H2, stating that CUL positively impacts DEV, is also confirmed (β = 0.69, p < .001), suggesting that shared beliefs and a sense of belonging enhance learning and growth initiatives. In line with Hypothesis H3, CUL significantly influenced Talent Retention (RET) (β = 0.67, p < .001), further underscoring its critical role in keeping employees committed over the long term.

Hypotheses H4 and H5, which state that INN positively influences ATT and DEV, are validated (β = 0.64, p < .001). Similarly, Hypothesis H6 shows that the impact of INN on RET, is validated (β = 0.69, p < .001). Therefore, it shows that creativity and a culture of experimentation create employer branding and foster employee growth.

In addition, Hypotheses H7 and H8, which proposed that SUS positively influence employee attraction ATT and DEV, are supported by the data (β = 0.58, p < .001). It clearly recommends that ethical and long-term thinking improve development experiences. Further, Hypothesis H9, which proposed SUS has a modest but

Table 7. Mediation estimates

Path	Effect	Estimate	Z	P
INN→ DEV→ RET	Indirect	0.468	2.14	<.001
INN→ RET	Direct	0.523	3.24	<.001
	Total	0.991	5.38	<.001

Table 8. Moderation estimates

Effect	Estimate	Z	P
SUS→RET	0.57986	5.5498	<.001
CUL→RET	0.54003	2.7043	<.001
SUS✻ CUL→RET	0.00223	0.035	0.972

significant impact on RET, is supported by the data (β = 0.43, p =.023). Moreover, the results (β = 0.60, p < .001) supported Hypothesis H10, which says that ATT has a positive effect on RET. This means that when people are drawn to a company because of its good reputation, clear mission, or promising career paths, they are more likely to stay with the business for a longer time.

Hypothesis H11 also states (β = 0.79, p < .001) that DEV strongly affects RET. This means that when companies help their employees grow by offering training, learning, and career support, employees feel more satisfied and are retained in the same organisation. This shows that helping employees develop is a key way to keep them in the organisation. Overall, the results offer strong support for the hypothesised model and reinforce the importance of integrating cultural, innovative, and sustainable practices in shaping a high-performing and committed entrepreneurial workforce.

6.6 Mediation and Moderation Analysis

The mediation and moderation results presented in Tables 7 and 8 provide further insights into the model. Hypothesis H12, which proposes that DEV mediates the link between INN and RET, is supported (β = 0.47, p < .001), indicating that INN enhances RET partly by creating development opportunities. This confirms the importance of employee growth in sustaining commitment. However, Hypothesis H13, which tests the moderating effect of CUL on the relationship between SUS and RET (β = 0.002), is not supported. Although the interaction is insignificant, both CUL and SUS individually show positive effects on retaining employees, reinforcing their importance in long-term workforce stability.

7. Findings

The summarised findings of the study are presented below:

- The study revealed that CUL exerts the strongest and most consistent influence on attraction, development, and retention, with values (β = 0.62, p < .001) for attraction, (β = 0.69, p < .001) for development, and (β = 0.67, p < .001) for retention. This indicates that when employees share and connect with the start-up organisation's core values, they tend to be more engaged, show greater commitment, and remain with the organisation for longer periods.
- Innovation also demonstrated a significant positive effect on attraction (β = 0.64, p < .001), development (β = 0.64, p < .001), and retention (β = 0.69, p < .001), suggesting that a workplace that encourages innovation enhances employee creativity and learning, which, in turn, leads to greater job satisfaction and long-term commitment.
- The role of sustainability was found to be meaningful in improving attraction (β = 0.58, p < .001) and development (β = 0.58, p < .001), indicating that sustainable practices enhance the startup's reputation and create a sense of purpose among employees. However, its impact on retention (β = 0.43, p = 0.023) was relatively weak, suggesting that it does not strongly influence their long-term retention within the organisation.
- ATT displayed a significant positive association with RET (β = 0.60, p < .001), indicating that startup organisations that attract the right talent through effective strategies are more likely to achieve long-term employee retention.
- Employee development recorded the strongest direct influence on RET (β = 0.79, p < .001), emphasising that continuous learning opportunities, career growth, and skill enhancement are vital factors that keep employees motivated and loyal to the organisation.
- The result of mediation analysis revealed that INN influenced retention both directly and indirectly through development, with a direct effect (β = 0.52, p < .001), an indirect effect via development (β = 0.47, p < .001), confirming that an innovative work environment fosters development, which in turn acts as a key driver of employee retention.
- In terms of moderation, both SUS (β = 0.58, p < .001) and CUL (β = 0.54, p < .001) significantly influenced retention. However, their interaction effect (β = 0.00223,

p = 0.972) was found to be statistically insignificant, implying that sustainability's effect on retention remains unchanged, regardless of cultural values.

8. Suggestions

The study offers several practical recommendations for startups to strengthen their talent management practices. Building strong CUL should be a priority in recruitment and team-building to attract employees who share the organisation's values and sense of belonging. Startups should also promote innovation by supporting creativity, experimentation, and continuous learning, while offering structured development programs like mentorship and upskilling to boost retention. Integrating sustainability into the company's culture and communicating social responsibility can further enhance employee trust and attract purpose-driven talent. Overall, a balanced focus on culture, innovation, and sustainability can help startups build a committed and high-performing workforce.

9. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into how cultural fit, INN, and SUS together shape talent management in Indian startups. The findings show that these elements work best when integrated, as they collectively strengthen employee engagement and long-term commitment. DEV was found to mediate the link between innovation and retention, emphasising the importance of growth opportunities in keeping employees motivated. Although CUL did not moderate the sustainability–retention relationship, it remained a strong influence overall. The study highlights the need for startups to adopt a holistic, values-driven approach to talent management to build resilient and future-ready teams.

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