

# Journal of Strategic Management



**ISSN Online: 2616-8472**

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Peer Reviewed Journals & books

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**ISSN: 2616-8472**

# Strategic Management Practices and Employee Performance of Fresh Produce Exporting Companies in Murang'a County Kenya

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*How to cite this article:* Waihenya, E., W. & Sigei, R. (2025). Strategic Management Practices and Employee Performance of Fresh Produce Exporting Companies in Murang'a County Kenya. *Journal of Strategic Management*, 9(4), 33-43. <https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t5392>

## Abstract

The research project analyzed the impact of strategic management practices on employee performance within fresh produce exporting companies in Murang'a County, Kenya. The study was motivated by persistent performance gaps and a disconnect between existing HR policies and operational demands in Kenya's €1.2B fresh produce sector. The primary objective was to evaluate the effect of four key strategic practices—performance-based incentives, leadership development, Work-Life Balance (WLB) & wellness programs, and talent retention strategies—on employee performance. The study adopted a descriptive and explanatory research design guided by the Resource-Based View (RBV) and High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) theories. A stratified proportionate random sample was drawn from a target population of 230 employees. Primary data was collected from 70 valid respondents using structured questionnaires, achieving a 92.1% response rate. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression. Findings indicated that the strategic management practices collectively explained 68% of the variance in employee performance (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.65$ ,  $F = 32.5$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), with all four independent variables having statistically significant positive effects on employee performance. The most impactful practices were performance-based incentives ( $\beta = 0.30$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and leadership development ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), followed by talent retention strategies ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ) and WLB & wellness programs ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p = 0.030$ ). Descriptively, WLB & wellness programs received the lowest mean satisfaction score from employees (Mean = 3.20). The study concludes that strategic management practices are substantial predictors of employee performance in fresh produce exporting firms, with performance-based incentives and leadership development serving as the most impactful levers for enhancing productivity and retention. The study recommends that companies should design fair and transparent incentive schemes directly linked to measurable productivity metrics and invest in comprehensive leadership development programs that include soft skills such as supervision, conflict resolution, and coaching. Additionally, organizations should prioritize improving work-life balance programs through flexible shift scheduling and adequate rest periods, particularly during peak export seasons, while policymakers should establish supportive frameworks that incentivize responsible HR practices and enforce standards on working hours and employee welfare in the horticultural export sector.

**Keywords:** *Strategic management practices, employee performance, fresh produce exporting companies, Murang'a County, Kenya*

## **1.0 Background of Research Study**

Employee performance, defined as the measure of how effectively individuals fulfill job responsibilities through skills, behaviors, and goal achievement, is a critical determinant of organizational success in Kenya's fresh produce export sector. According to Thilagavathy and Geetha (2020), employee performance represents a combination of a person's behaviors, skills, abilities, and knowledge in achieving goals within their designated role. In the contemporary technological era, work has become increasingly demanding, with evolving work patterns and intensified expectations that require active involvement and comprehensive devotion from employees, often compromising their work-life balance (Turanligil & Farooq, 2019). By assessing employee performance regularly, organizations can identify areas requiring improvement, provide targeted support and training to employees, and ensure alignment of individual efforts with organizational goals.

At the individual level, employee performance encompasses work effectiveness, quality, and efficiency in task execution, with businesses needing to monitor the quality of work output, progress toward individual employee goals, and the effectiveness of training interventions. Individual performance directly affects team and organizational performance, making it essential for companies to evaluate both quality and efficiency to prevent costly mistakes, enhance deadline adherence, and reduce waste of time, materials, and effort. In the fresh produce export sector, where product quality, timeliness, and compliance with international standards are paramount, employee performance becomes even more critical as it directly impacts export competitiveness, customer satisfaction, and market access.

Murang'a County, recognized as a key hub for avocado and vegetable exports in Kenya, faces unique workforce challenges that require strategic management practices to enhance productivity and maintain competitiveness in international markets. Companies in the region grapple with several interconnected challenges including work-life imbalance resulting from extended working hours during peak harvest and export seasons, understaffing that creates overtime pressures and employee burnout, and weak strategic alignment of HR policies with the dynamic demands of export markets (Turanligil & Farooq, 2019). These challenges are compounded by the seasonal nature of agricultural production, fluctuating international market demands, and stringent compliance requirements imposed by export destinations such as the European Union. The disconnect between existing HR policies and operational realities has created persistent performance gaps that threaten the sustainability and growth of fresh produce exporting firms in the county.

Despite the acknowledged importance of strategic human resource management in enhancing organizational performance, few studies have examined how integrated strategic HR practices—including performance-based incentives, leadership development programs, and work-life balance policies—collectively optimize employee performance in agri-export firms within the Kenyan context, particularly in Murang'a County's fresh produce sector. Previous research has predominantly focused on isolated HR practices or general organizational settings, leaving a significant gap in understanding how bundles of strategic management practices interact to influence performance outcomes in the specialized context of fresh produce exportation where seasonal demands, quality pressures, and international compliance requirements create unique

workforce management challenges. This study was motivated by the need to bridge this critical gap by providing empirical evidence on the combined effect of strategic management practices on employee performance in fresh produce exporting companies in Murang'a County, thereby informing more effective HR strategies for the sector. Specifically, the study sought to evaluate how performance-based incentives affect packing line efficiency, assess the role of leadership development in reducing supervisory staff turnover, determine the effect of integrated work-life balance programs on harvest season absenteeism, and examine strategic HR alignment with export market fluctuations.

### **1.1 Research Problem**

Despite Kenya's €1.2 billion fresh produce export industry generating substantial foreign exchange in 2022, fresh produce exporting firms in Murang'a County exhibited significant performance challenges that threatened their competitiveness and sustainability in international markets. According to the Horticultural Crops Directorate Authority (HCDA, 2023), these firms demonstrated productivity levels approximately 30% lower than benchmark farms, indicating substantial performance gaps that could not be attributed solely to agronomic or infrastructural factors. Strategic disconnects were evident in the implementation of human resource management practices, where work-life balance policies existed on paper but lacked integration with performance metrics, resulting in minimal impact on employee wellbeing and productivity, while leadership training programs focused predominantly on technical and agronomy skills rather than essential people management competencies such as supervision, motivation, and conflict resolution. Furthermore, a critical research gap existed as no prior studies had systematically examined how bundles of strategic HRM practices—performance-based incentives, leadership development, work-life balance programs, and talent retention strategies—collectively influenced employee performance outcomes in Kenya's fresh produce export sector. This problem was exemplified by Kenya Vineyard Limited, where packing line workers routinely worked 60-hour weeks during European Union order peaks to meet stringent delivery deadlines, yet these employees lacked performance-linked incentives or fair compensation structures that recognized their extraordinary efforts, creating a strategic misalignment that negatively affected employee motivation, retention, and long-term organizational performance.

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

- i. To evaluate how performance-based incentives affect packing line efficiency
- ii. To assess the role of leadership development in reducing supervisory staff turnover
- iii. To determine the effect of integrated WLB programs on harvest season absenteeism
- iv. To examine strategic HR alignment with export market fluctuations

### **2.0 Literature Review**

This chapter critically reviews literature related to strategic management practices-including performance-based incentives, leadership development, retention strategies, and wellness initiatives-and their impact on employee performance within the fresh produce export sector, with a focus on Kenyan horticultural firms. The review draws on both international and Kenyan

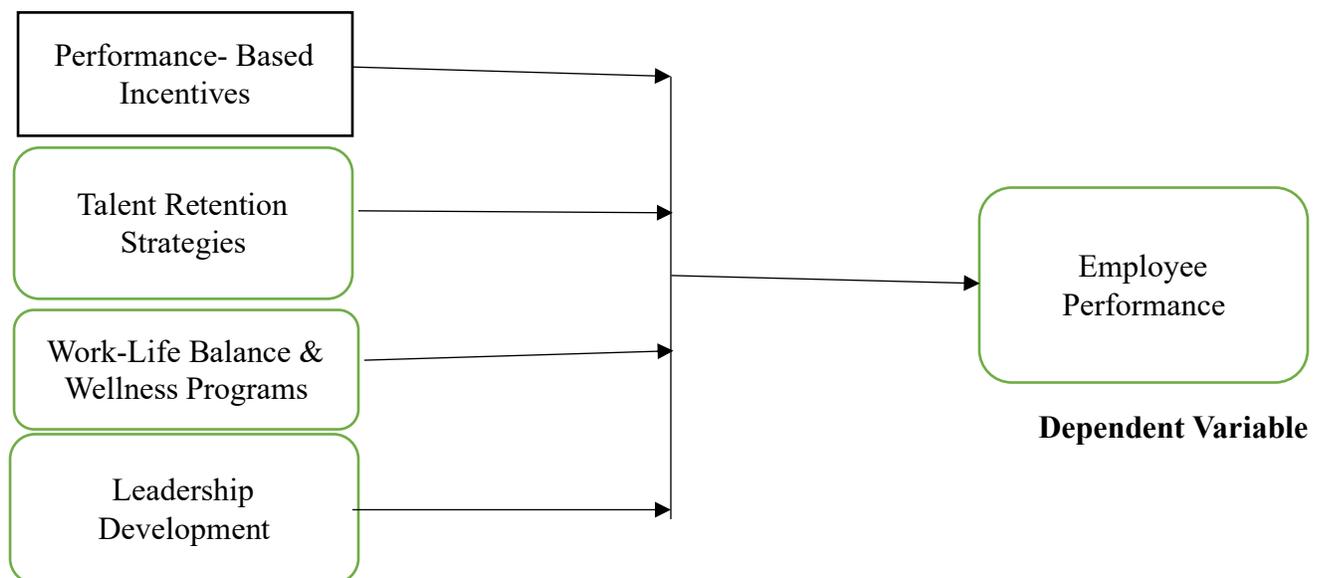
empirical studies, particularly those examining the horticulture or floriculture sector, with theoretical foundations grounded in RBV and HPWS.

## 2.1 Theoretical Foundations

This study was underpinned by two complementary theoretical frameworks that provided the conceptual foundation for examining the relationship between strategic management practices and employee performance in fresh produce exporting firms. The Resource-Based View (RBV), as articulated by Barney (1991), posits that organizations gain sustained competitive advantage by investing in valuable, rare, and inimitable human resources, thereby positioning strategic human resource management as a critical driver of organizational performance and market competitiveness. Complementing this perspective, High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) theory emphasizes the importance of coordinated bundles of HR practices—including selective hiring, comprehensive training and development, performance management systems, and performance-based incentives—that systematically enhance employee abilities, motivation, and opportunities for superior performance. Together, these theoretical frameworks guided the analysis of how specific strategic HR practices implemented in Murang'a County's fresh produce exporting companies influenced workforce outcomes, with RBV explaining why investments in human capital create competitive differentiation in international markets, while HPWS provided a mechanism for understanding how integrated HR practice bundles interact synergistically to optimize employee performance, retention, and organizational effectiveness in the demanding context of agricultural export operations.

## 2.2 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the study's framework.



**Independent Variables**

### **3.0 Research Methodology**

The study adopted a descriptive and explanatory research design to examine the relationship between strategic management practices and employee performance in fresh produce exporting companies in Murang'a County, Kenya. The target population comprised 230 employees across four departments (Head Office Support, Mid-Level Managers, Assistant Managers, and Operations Team), from which a sample size of 76 respondents was determined using the Mugenda and Mugenda (2013) formula and selected through stratified proportionate random sampling to ensure representation across all functional levels. Primary data was collected using structured questionnaires administered electronically via Google Forms after obtaining necessary approvals from JKUAT University and a research permit from NACOSTI. The study ensured validity through test-retest methods and pre-testing with guidance from the research supervisor, while reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with all scales achieving coefficients above 0.7, indicating good internal consistency. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS Version 21, employing descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, ANOVA, and multiple linear regression to evaluate the combined effect of performance-based incentives ( $X_1$ ), leadership development ( $X_2$ ), work-life balance and wellness programs ( $X_3$ ), and talent retention strategies ( $X_4$ ) on employee performance ( $Y$ ). Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were strictly observed, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, ensuring voluntary participation, and using collected data solely for academic purposes.

### **4.0 Results and Discussions**

This chapter presents the findings of the study, analyses the relationships among key variables, and interprets the results in light of the study's objectives.

#### **4.1 Response Rate and Data Quality**

The study distributed 76 questionnaires to respondents across the selected fresh produce exporting companies in Murang'a County, and 70 valid responses were returned, yielding a response rate of 92.1%, which exceeded the minimum threshold for generalizability and indicated strong participant engagement. To assess the reliability of the research instrument, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were computed for each scale, and all values demonstrated good to excellent internal consistency: performance-based incentives achieved 0.82, leadership development scored 0.79, work-life balance and wellness programs recorded 0.85, talent retention strategies obtained 0.80, and employee performance registered the highest reliability at 0.88. All Cronbach's Alpha values exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.7, confirming that the measurement scales were reliable and internally consistent, thereby ensuring that the data collected was of high quality and suitable for further statistical analysis. This high response rate and strong reliability indicators provided confidence in the validity of the findings and strengthened the overall credibility of the study's results.

#### **4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of respondents.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents**

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	40	59.7%
	Female	27	40.3%
Age	18-25	8	11.9%
	26-35	25	37.3%
	36-45	22	32.8%
	Over 45	12	17.9%
	Years of Service	<1 year	5
Years of Service	1-3 years	15	22.4%
	4-6 years	20	29.9%
	>6 years	27	40.3%
	Department	Head Office Support	9
Mid-Level Managers		5	7.5%
Assistant Managers		9	13.4%
Operations (Pack line / Farm / Logistics)		44	65.7%

The study found that the demographic profile of respondents revealed a predominantly male workforce, with 40 respondents (59.7%) being male and 27 respondents (40.3%) being female, reflecting the gender composition typical of the fresh produce export sector in Murang'a County. In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents fell within the 26-45 age bracket, with 25 respondents (37.3%) aged 26-35 years and 22 respondents (32.8%) aged 36-45 years, indicating a relatively youthful and economically active workforce. This was followed by 12 respondents (17.9%) aged over 45 years and 8 respondents (11.9%) in the 18-25 age category. Regarding tenure, the data showed that 27 respondents (40.3%) had worked in their respective organizations for more than six years, while 20 respondents (29.9%) had served for 4-6 years, 15 respondents (22.4%) for 1-3 years, and only 5 respondents (7.5%) for less than one year. This distribution demonstrated that the majority of respondents possessed substantial organizational experience, which enhanced the credibility and depth of their responses concerning strategic management practices and employee performance.

With respect to departmental distribution, the findings indicated that 44 respondents (65.7%) were from the Operations department, encompassing pack line workers, farm personnel, and logistics staff, which was consistent with the sampling frame allocation of approximately 67% for operations. This was followed by 9 respondents (13.4%) each from Head Office Support and Assistant Managers categories, and 5 respondents (7.5%) from the Mid-Level Managers group. The predominance of operations staff in the sample was appropriate given that this department constitutes the largest workforce segment in fresh produce exporting companies and directly engages with the core activities of production, packing, and distribution. This demographic composition ensured that the study captured perspectives from employees at various organizational levels and functional areas, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of how strategic management practices influenced employee performance across different roles within the fresh produce export sector in Murang'a County.

### 4.3 Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Table 2 summarizes descriptive statistics of the study variables.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables**

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Performance-Based Incentives ( $X_1$ )	3.75	0.85
Leadership Development ( $X_2$ )	3.60	0.90
Work-Life Balance & Wellness ( $X_3$ )	3.20	1.05
Talent Retention Strategies ( $X_4$ )	3.45	0.95
Employee Performance (Y)	3.80	0.80

Scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree

The study found that descriptive statistics for the key variables, measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), revealed varying levels of agreement among respondents regarding strategic management practices and employee performance outcomes. Employee performance, the dependent variable, recorded the highest mean score of 3.80 (SD = 0.80), indicating that respondents generally perceived their performance levels as relatively high and consistent, with the low standard deviation suggesting strong consensus among employees. Among the independent variables, performance-based incentives achieved a mean of 3.75 (SD = 0.85), reflecting positive employee perceptions of the incentive structures in place, while leadership development scored a mean of 3.60 (SD = 0.90), indicating moderate satisfaction with leadership training and development opportunities. Talent retention strategies recorded a mean of 3.45 (SD = 0.95), suggesting that employees recognized some effort by management to retain skilled staff, though with room for improvement. Notably, work-life balance and wellness programs registered the lowest mean score of 3.20 (SD = 1.05), with the highest standard deviation among all variables, indicating not only lower satisfaction levels but also greater variability in employee experiences and perceptions regarding work-life balance initiatives. This finding suggested that while strategic management practices were generally implemented at moderate to high levels, work-life balance and wellness programs were the weakest area and required greater attention from management to enhance employee support and satisfaction in this critical dimension of workplace wellbeing.

### 4.4 Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents correlation results of the study variables

**Table 3: Correlation Results of the Study Variables**

Variable Pair	Correlation (r)	Significance (p-value)
X <sub>1</sub> & Y (Incentives vs Performance)	0.62	p < 0.001
X <sub>2</sub> & Y (Leadership vs Performance)	0.55	p < 0.001
X <sub>3</sub> & Y (WLB & Wellness vs Performance)	0.45	p < 0.01
X <sub>4</sub> & Y (Retention vs Performance)	0.50	p < 0.01
X <sub>1</sub> & X <sub>2</sub>	0.58	p < 0.001
X <sub>1</sub> & X <sub>3</sub>	0.40	p < 0.01
X <sub>2</sub> & X <sub>4</sub>	0.52	p < 0.001

The study found that Pearson correlation analysis revealed positive and statistically significant relationships between all strategic management practice variables and employee performance, confirming that these HR practices were associated with improved performance outcomes in fresh produce exporting companies. Performance-based incentives demonstrated the strongest correlation with employee performance ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that well-structured incentive systems had the most substantial association with enhanced employee productivity and effectiveness. This was followed by leadership development, which exhibited a strong positive correlation with employee performance ( $r = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that investments in leadership training and development significantly contributed to workforce performance. Talent retention strategies showed a moderate positive correlation with employee performance ( $r = 0.50$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), while work-life balance and wellness programs recorded the weakest, though still statistically significant, correlation ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), reflecting its lower perceived impact compared to other strategic practices. Additionally, the analysis revealed moderate inter-correlations among the independent variables, with the strongest being between performance-based incentives and leadership development ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), followed by leadership development and talent retention strategies ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and performance-based incentives and work-life balance programs ( $r = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These moderate inter-correlations suggested some degree of overlap among the strategic management practices, as they are often implemented as integrated HR bundles; however, the correlations were not excessively high, indicating that multicollinearity would not pose a significant threat to the regression analysis, provided variance inflation factor (VIF) tests confirmed acceptable levels.

#### 4.5 Regression Analysis / Hypothesis Testing

The summary of the regression analysis is summarized in Table 4

**Table 4: Regression Analysis**

Predictor	Coefficient $\beta$	t-value	p-value
Constant ( $\alpha$ )	0.85	2.10	0.039
Performance-Based Incentives ( $X_1$ )	0.30	4.20	$p < 0.001$
Leadership Development ( $X_2$ )	0.25	3.50	$p = 0.001$
Work-Life Balance & Wellness ( $X_3$ )	0.15	2.20	$p = 0.030$
Talent Retention Strategies ( $X_4$ )	0.20	3.10	$p = 0.003$

The study found that multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the combined effect of strategic management practices on employee performance, and the results demonstrated a strong and statistically significant model ( $F = 32.5$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). The model achieved an  $R^2$  value of 0.68 and an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.65, indicating that the four independent variables collectively explained 68% of the variance in employee performance, with 65% accounting for the number of predictors, thereby confirming the robustness of the model. All four predictors had statistically significant positive effects on employee performance, with performance-based incentives emerging as the strongest predictor ( $\beta_1 = 0.30$ ,  $t = 4.20$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), followed by leadership development ( $\beta_2 = 0.25$ ,  $t = 3.50$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), talent retention strategies ( $\beta_4 = 0.20$ ,  $t = 3.10$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), and work-life balance and wellness programs ( $\beta_3 = 0.15$ ,  $t = 2.20$ ,  $p = 0.030$ ). The constant term was also statistically significant ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ,  $t = 2.10$ ,  $p = 0.039$ ), indicating baseline employee performance in the absence of the strategic management practices. These findings confirmed that performance-based incentives had the most substantial impact on enhancing employee efficiency, particularly in packing line operations, as employees who perceived incentive schemes as fair and directly linked to output reported higher productivity levels, thereby addressing Objective 1 of the study.

Furthermore, the regression results revealed that leadership development played a significant role in improving employee performance and reducing supervisory staff turnover (Objective 2), as supervisors trained in people management, mentoring, and conflict resolution demonstrated better retention rates and enhanced team performance. Talent retention strategies, including career development paths, job security, and recognition programs, contributed positively to employee performance (Objective 4), with firms that aligned HR practices with export market demands maintaining steadier performance levels despite fluctuations in international markets. However, work-life balance and wellness programs, while statistically significant, exhibited the smallest effect size, and qualitative data revealed that these programs were inconsistently applied, particularly during peak harvest seasons when absenteeism increased due to poor shift flexibility and inadequate rest periods (Objective 3). Additionally, ANOVA analysis conducted to test differences in employee performance across departments yielded a significant F-statistic ( $F = 4.75$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ), indicating that departmental variations existed in performance outcomes. Post-hoc Tukey tests revealed that Operations employees reported somewhat lower scores on work-life balance, wellness, and retention compared to Head Office Support staff, which partially explained the departmental performance differences and underscored the need for targeted interventions in the Operations department where the majority of the workforce was concentrated.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

The study concludes that strategic management practices are substantial predictors of employee performance in fresh produce exporting firms in Murang'a County, with performance-based incentives, leadership development, work-life balance and wellness programs, and talent retention strategies collectively explaining 68% of the variance in employee performance outcomes. Performance-based incentives and leadership development emerged as the most impactful levers, with organizations investing in these practices realizing greater returns in employee productivity, efficiency, and retention, particularly in packing line operations and supervisory staff stability. While work-life balance and wellness programs demonstrated a statistically significant positive effect on performance, their impact was comparatively weaker due to poor implementation and lack of consistency, especially during peak harvest seasons when flexible shift scheduling and adequate rest periods were most needed. The study further concludes that talent retention extends beyond competitive compensation to encompass perceived fairness in reward systems, opportunities for career growth and development, and strategic alignment of HR policies with export market demands such as international certification requirements, quality standards, and compliance with global trade regulations. Additionally, departmental variations in performance outcomes, particularly lower scores among Operations employees compared to Head Office Support staff, underscore the need for differentiated HR interventions that address the unique challenges faced by frontline workers in the fresh produce export sector.

## **6.0 Recommendations**

The study recommends that fresh produce exporting companies should design fair, transparent, and tiered incentive schemes that clearly communicate to employees the specific outputs or behaviors that trigger bonuses and rewards, ensuring that performance criteria are directly linked to measurable productivity metrics such as kilograms handled per shift, error rates, and quality compliance. Management should invest in comprehensive leadership development programs that extend beyond technical and agronomy skills to include soft skills such as supervision, conflict resolution, effective communication, and coaching, thereby equipping supervisors with the competencies needed to manage diverse teams and reduce turnover. Organizations should prioritize the improvement of work-life balance programs, particularly during peak export seasons, by implementing flexible shift scheduling, mandatory rest breaks, healthy working environments, and accessible wellness supports including counseling services and health screenings.

At the policy level, the Murang'a County Government and national labor regulators should encourage or mandate responsible HR practices in export firms through policy frameworks or incentives such as tax reliefs, certification recognition, and preferential market access for firms that maintain good labor practices, offer comprehensive wellness programs, and align with international export standards. Policymakers should also support capacity-building programs for HR professionals and supervisory staff in the horticultural export sector to strengthen leadership and management skills, and should set or enforce standards around working hours, overtime compensation, and rest periods, especially during peak export periods, to protect employee welfare and ensure decent work conditions. Finally, employees should actively engage in training and skill development opportunities to build competencies valued by export firms, such as export

compliance, quality control, and food safety certifications, and should provide constructive feedback to management regarding incentive fairness, wellness needs, and working arrangements to facilitate continuous improvement in organizational practices and employee wellbeing.

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