

Exploring meaningful rewards for pharmaceutical employees during COVID-19



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Orientation: The emergence of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has compelled various organisations to alter their human resource management approaches in response to a challenging work milieu. Providing meaningful rewards is imperative for maintaining employee productivity and business continuity during turmoil.

Research purpose: The main objective of this research was to explore significant incentives for employees of pharmaceutical enterprises amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study examined the reward preferences of pharmaceutical professionals in managerial positions concerning their age and gender.

Motivation for the study: Despite the extensive body of research on rewards during the COVID-19 pandemic, there exists a notable gap in the literature regarding the investigation of total rewards in the pharmaceutical industry from the vantage points of gender and age.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative research approach was followed with data collected from managerial employees in a pharmaceutical company ($N = 12$). Thematic analyses were applied.

Main findings: Overall, the female participants exhibited a greater propensity towards all rewards than male counterparts. The COVID-19 pandemic mostly impacted female Millennials, who identified all aspects of total rewards as crucial. Male Baby Boomers were more inclined towards being incentivised by monetary remuneration than non-monetary perks.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings underscore the importance of leaders prioritising human-centred values such as trust, appreciation, interpersonal connections, and collaborative teamwork.

Contribution/value-add: The study's results prompt researchers and practitioners to reconsider conventional characteristics and incentive inclinations of distinct age cohorts and gender categories, which have undergone modifications because of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Keywords: COVID-19; Fourth Industrial Revolution; gender equality; generational cohorts; total rewards.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic presented a considerable challenge to the conventional work environment, shifting how companies generate value, the location and method of employee work, and interpersonal interactions (Deas & Coetzee, 2022). Conversely, employees were forced to navigate a volatile, uncertain, physically and psychologically hazardous environment characterised by the 'great unknown' (Mockaitis et al., 2022). The healthcare profession, particularly its frontline personnel, faced a variety of personal and occupational hazards, including potential virus exposure, mortality, stress, and burnout, as well as inadequate physical infrastructure, unrealistic client expectations, digital overload, and technostress (Johnston et al., 2022; Jovičić-Bata et al., 2021; Khojah et al., 2021). The uncertainty surrounding the duration of the lockdown and the possibility of future waves prompted companies to adopt remote work and telecommuting as the prevailing mode of work (Bonacini et al., 2021). The augmented dependence on technology has further led to a fusion of work and personal life, rendering the conventional 9-h workday obsolete in the face of the pandemic and the need to sustain commercial operations (Tušl et al., 2021). The challenge arguably presented is maintaining meaningful work experiences for employees amid a pandemic characterised by intensifying societal, personal and work demands (Scheel et al., 2023).

The main objective of this research was to explore meaningful rewards for employees from a pharmaceutical company. Urias (2017) asserts that pharmaceutical companies have a crucial impact on the welfare of societies and overall economic advancement by enhancing access to medication. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the precarious state of the African continent concerning its medical support, including vaccines and medicines, as well as its infrastructure (Ussai et al., 2023). Muflih et al. (2021) argue that pharmaceutical industries require well-positioned pharmacists to provide advanced clinical and public health services during the pandemic. According to Ibrahim et al. (2022), the novel pharmacist responsibilities that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic may continue to be necessary and relevant for the aftermath. The COVID-19 pandemic, though, has enabled pharmacists to utilise their professional expertise and competencies for the emergency supply of healthcare services to patients, thanks to the introduction of more advanced technologies (Lynch & O'Leary, 2021). Additionally, it has been suggested that a fulfilling work environment may enhance the job commitment of pharmacists and promote their retention (Bondi et al., 2023).

The research focussed on determining meaningful total reward preferences of pharmaceutical professionals in managerial positions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pharmaceutical industry was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic from both a business and employee perspective (Ayati, Saiyarsarai, & Nikfar, 2020). Pharmaceutical companies had lower productivity at an operational level because of social distancing and reduced workforces during lockdown (Barshikar, 2020). However, the pandemic increased customers' need for pharmaceutical products, which enabled pharmaceutical companies to thrive through growth in demand. The increase in demand for pharmaceutical products meant a need to increase the supply. However, because of global travel restrictions, the supply of products to consumers was delayed (Barshikar, 2020). Changes in demand for the stock, a move to a hybrid model of working, and changes in regulations added additional pressure. The industry furthermore moved from face-to-face interactions (at the market and selling their products) to remote interactions to comply with social distancing precautions (Ayati, 2020). Medical representatives were most affected by the pandemic, as the fear of job loss affected their well-being (Darwish et al., 2020). Therefore, new ways of working are needed, which should be created with the input of management, employees, and stakeholders (Barshikar, 2020).

In this research, we focus on the reward preferences of pharmaceutical staff from a gender and age perspective. Li et al. (2023) refer to the need hierarchy theory, which posits that individuals' needs and incentives may vary. The research by Li et al. (2023) revealed that various demographic factors, such as gender and age, exhibit dissimilar levels of contentment with their compensations amid the COVID-19 crisis. Khwela-Mdluli and Beharry-Ramraj (2020) have noted that women employed in frontline occupations, including

medical care and social welfare, face a heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 and transmitting the virus to their households, given that their workplaces are considered high-risk environments for COVID-19 transmission. Consequently, for numerous organisations, remote and hybrid work may serve as a viable long-term solution to the pandemic (Bonacini et al., 2021). Li et al. (2023) conducted research indicating that during disruption, pharmacy management should consider gender differences when providing organisational support. Perhaps because of gender differences, men are more independent and prefer to ignore the opinions and support of others at work. While women prefer to work in a harmonious and congenial atmosphere and are more receptive to the opinions and support of others (Zhu et al., 2017). Grubb (2016) notes that with each new generation entering the workforce, a distinct culture and set of priorities are brought into the work environment. The complexity of implementing a uniform reward system that caters to the requirements of all employees is compounded by the variety of reward preferences, such as career advancement, work-life equilibrium, flexibility, and remuneration (Martin & Ottemann, 2016). The current state of the workforce has created a need for organisations to implement a more comprehensive strategy for managing rewards (Zoakah et al., 2021). Therefore, an exploration of meaningful rewards for pharmacist staff is imperative.

In this research, we attempt to answer the following research questions:

- *What are the meaningful incentives for employees of pharmaceutical enterprises amid the COVID-19 pandemic?*
- *Are there any differences between the reward preferences of pharmaceutical professionals in managerial positions based on their age?*
- *Are there any differences between the reward preferences of pharmaceutical professionals in managerial positions based on their gender?*

In what follows next, the literature review is presented.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

Generational theory

Generational theory is best described by Strauss and Howe (2009), who stated that a generation is a group of people of similar ages in a specific time in history and, therefore, share similar personality traits. Strauss and Howe (2009) use a cyclical theory of history to explain generational theory (Papenhausen, 2009). The generational theory posits that people of similar age or within the same generation share key characteristics based on similar experiences, differentiating them from other generations. A social generation spans approximately 20 years, and people experience four life cycles over 80 years (Okros, 2020). The life cycles are childhood (from birth to 20 years), young and rising adulthood (from 20 to 40 years), midlife (from 40 to 60 years), and elderhood (from 60 to 80 years) (Okros, 2020). Table 1 illustrates the different

TABLE 1: Generational groups with their respective ages and years in which they were born.

Generation	Years born	Age range (in 2022)
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	58–76 years old
Generation X	1965–1984	38 – 57 years old
Generation Y or Millennials	1985–2004	18 – 37 years old
Generation Z	2005–2024	0 – 17 years old

generations, the year ranges people were born within those generations, and their age ranges in the year 2022.

The concept of a social generation is vital to generational theory. A social generation refers to a group of people with a shared historical and socio-cultural location, limiting them to specific experiences (Demeijer & Stoffels, 2019). The generational theory states that societies undergo cycles of varying lengths, which influence the archetype of a generation. Each cycle begins with a crisis, then an awakening, then an unravelling, and, finally, it again becomes a crisis stage. Each generation will fit an archetype brought on by the cycle in which society is at the time (Okros, 2020).

Total rewards

Providing employee rewards is crucial in attracting and retaining skilled personnel, cultivating employee loyalty, promoting ongoing learning and development within the organisation, and stimulating enhanced employee performance (Manzoor et al., 2021). The present study employed the Total Rewards Framework (TRF) to ascertain the reward preferences of pharmaceutical personnel amid the COVID-19 pandemic (World at Work, 2020). The TRM model conceptualises total rewards that encompass five distinct dimensions. These dimensions include compensation, which refers to both fixed and variable pay, well-being, which encompasses an individual's physical, emotional, and financial state, as well as their work-life balance. Additionally, benefits such as leave, pension, medical aid and development opportunities such as employee upskilling, promotions, and mentorship are included. Finally, recognition in the form of employer acknowledgement is also considered. These dimensions significantly shape an organisation's strategy for attracting, motivating, and retaining employees.

Shtembari et al. (2022) contend that restructuring compensation and benefits should be aligned with the contemporary and prospective workforce's working requirements and inclinations in the novel workplace paradigm. Pattnaik and Padhi (2022) conducted a study demonstrating the efficacy of a compassionate approach to total rewards. This approach was characterised by agility, fairness, and hyper-personalisation, and was influential in managing employee expectations related to pay, benefits, learning and development, and the work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Abdullah et al. (2021) found that healthcare workers exhibit organisational loyalty and were willing to make concessions regarding work demands and work-family conflict when they received social (e.g., interaction with colleagues, cooperative colleagues) and psychological (e.g., recognition from peers and supervisors,

encouragement and positive feedback, autonomy and control) rewards during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reward preferences based on age

Beck-Krala (2020) observed that individuals belonging to Generation X (the generation born between 1965 and 1984) and Millennials (the generation born between 1985 and 2004) tend to prioritise employers who provide growth prospects, prioritise work-life balance, foster a supportive work culture, and offer less demanding job roles. Pregolato et al. (2017) found that the most highly valued factors among Millennials were benefits, followed by performance recognition and remuneration. Work-life balance and career development were of relatively lower importance. Okros (2020) asserts that Millennials were exposed to technology early on and are currently evolving in a highly interconnected global environment. As such, these individuals place high importance on adaptability within their personal and professional pursuits. Pregolato et al. (2017) discovered that Generation X workers exhibited a greater preference towards remuneration in the form of higher salaries, medical benefits, and deferred compensation, which can be attributed to their heightened emphasis on fulfilling their family's medical requirements. Possible reasons for Generation X favouring these rewards could be attributed to this group's family focus, as they are likely to have young dependants for whom provision must be made in respect of medical aid. Rajkumar (2014) conducted a study that yielded comparable findings, indicating that Generation X employees more highly esteem benefits than other generational cohorts. Bussin et al. (2019) conducted a study revealing that Millennials emphasised career development and leave more than other generations. Bussin and Toerien (2015) found that younger employees (Generation X) have a growing appreciation for self-directed learning, development, and training opportunities their employers provide.

Snelgar et al. (2013) assert that the requirements of employees undergo a transformation as they grow older. The study by Rajkumar (2014) found a notable difference in the importance placed on salaries between Baby Boomer and Millennial employees. The former group placed a significantly higher emphasis on salaries. The aforementioned study further showed that Millennials exhibited lower interest in short-term and long-term variable compensation than their older counterparts. Pregolato et al. (2017) discovered comparable outcomes, indicating that remuneration was deemed more significant for Generation X and Baby Boomers in contrast to Generation Y (Millennials). Compared to other generations, Generation Y prioritises work-life balance to a greater extent. Dunne's (2022) research revealed a difference in the priorities of Generation Y and Generation Z, with the former placing greater emphasis on compensation and benefits.

The Incentive Research Foundation (2020) explored the reward preferences of generations during COVID-19 relating to tangible non-cash gifts, experiential gifts, development opportunities, and intangible recognition. Millennials and Generation Z showed a lower preference for tangible non-monetary gifts, such as gift cards and food gifts, than Baby Boomers. Baby

Boomers and Generation X had a higher preference for experiential gifts, such as paid events and company-paid dinners. Generation Z was more attracted to receiving intangible recognition, such as paid day off, compared to other recognitions. None of the generation groups seemed to prioritise career development opportunities. The younger cohorts, namely Generation Z and Millennials, preferred job title advancement, whereas the Baby Boomer generation favoured the creation of personally fulfilling work experiences tailored to their individual preferences. Deas and Coetzee's (2022) study revealed that, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Generation X placed a higher degree of importance on achieving a balance between their professional and personal lives than other generational cohorts.

Reward preferences and career stage

The reward preferences of employees transform as they advance through various stages of career development (Fobian & Maloa, 2020). Coetzee et al. (2017) expound that Super's career development theory delineates the various stages of career development and their impact on an individual's professional and personal life. These stages encompass exploration (i.e., the process of finalising occupational choice and vocational identity), establishment (i.e., the stabilisation of work positions), maintenance (i.e., the sustenance of career and seniority), and decline (i.e., retirement and skills transfer). According to Super's career theory, there exists an interdependence among life roles, whereby an individual's work-life role and career choices are influenced by other life roles, such as their parental life role (O'Neill & Jepsen, 2019). The integration of life roles in a seamless manner provides individuals with a sense of purpose and accomplishment, resulting in a positive outlook towards their professional endeavours. In cases where there is a lack of integration between life roles, it can result in challenges in one's career and other life roles. Attaining and upholding equilibrium among the various responsibilities carried out concurrently is of significance throughout an individual's lifespan, particularly in moments of turmoil or progression in personal or professional phases (Kot et al., 2020).

A study by Lepojevic et al. (2018) shows that job-related characteristics influence the job satisfaction of individuals with their rewards at different career stages. Managers in their establishment stage gained greater job satisfaction from their salary, company practices, and supervisors than managers at other career stages. Employees in their maintenance stage value fringe benefits more than employees at different career stages, as they are less inclined to work harder to achieve rewards. Millennial employees were more driven to find meaning in their work, especially in the exploration stage or entering the establishment stage of their careers. Furthermore, a study by Koekemoer and Crafford (2019), on Millennials of a South African IT company, indicated that the participants seek balance and meaning in their careers and view career success as a life-long journey. Millennials are also the most influenced by Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technology and will soon make up most of

the workforce (Okros, 2020). According to Van Dyk and Coetzee (2012), employees in the entry and establishment stages of their careers, that is Generation X and Millennials, are less satisfied with their jobs and work deliverables than employees in other stages of their careers. Generation X employees are mostly near the decline stage of their careers as they reach retirement age, and thus more Millennial employees will be required to fill their positions (Coetzee et al., 2017). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the needs and values of Millennial employees and the implications for the future workforce of the 4IR (Wong & Rasdi, 2019).

Reward preferences based on gender

Robitschek and Hardin (2017) posit that considering individual differences is crucial in formulating life roles and career development. Integrating life roles without noticeable seams gives individuals a sense of purpose and accomplishment, resulting in a favourable outlook towards their professional pursuits. In cases where there is a lack of integration between life roles, it can result in difficulties in one's career and challenges with other life roles. Attaining and sustaining equilibrium among the various responsibilities undertaken concurrently is of significance throughout an individual's lifespan, particularly during upheaval or progression in personal or professional phases (Kot et al., 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that women tend to place a higher degree of importance on achieving a balance between work and personal life, as well as flexibility in their work arrangements, compared to men (see Maxwell, 2020; Pregolato et al., 2017). According to Brigman and Bussin (2019), women prioritise work-life balance more than men, owing to their family responsibilities. While there has been some progress in recent years, men's uptake of childcare responsibilities in society remains relatively slow (Brigman & Bussin, 2019; Johnston et al., 2020; Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that women continue to undertake most parenting tasks, as highlighted in a study by Dik et al. (2019). The issue of gender inequality and job losses resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant concern in South Africa. This is particularly noteworthy given that many households in the country rely on women as the primary source of income (Bonacini et al., 2021). A briefing report released by the European Parliament in 2022, revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased the number of women's unpaid care and household work hours.

Most research indicates that males value rewards related to finance and prestige, such as promotions. In the context of the pharmaceutical industry, Wiese and Coetzee (2013) discovered that male employees placed significant importance on growth and advancement opportunities. Pregolato et al. (2017) found that women considered remuneration and performance recognition as significant incentives. Male individuals prioritise financial benefits more than females. In a similar vein, the research by Maxwell (2020) showed that women preferred a combination of non-monetary incentives, such as acknowledgement, whereas men preferred monetary incentives. Maxwell (2020) found

that women were pursuing alternative employment options because of receiving fewer rewards and minimal recognition and feedback. In a study conducted by Cornwall et al. (2018), women tend to favour smaller and more frequent rewards, while men tend to be more incentivised by the size of the reward during periods of uncertainty. The Incentive Research Foundation (2020) corroborated these findings, indicating that women placed greater significance on additional paid leave, flexible scheduling, corporate gifts, company-funded dinners, and the establishment of meaningful work experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, male individuals are more inclined towards job promotion that entails increased job responsibilities and acknowledgement as high achievers.

To conclude, the literature review offers a comprehensive summary of the reward inclinations of employees, considering their age, career stage, and gender. The discourse reveals that reward inclinations among distinct generations, in conjunction with their professional phases, are multifaceted and fluctuating, precluding a universal approach ascribed to a particular age cohort. Regarding gender, it seems females prefer benefits while males prioritise financial and prestige-related considerations. Exploring age and gender preferences is poised to provide intriguing insights, particularly considering the current tumultuous climate and the persistent adherence to conventional gender roles and associated responsibilities.

Research design

Research approach

The study opted for a qualitative research approach to address inquiries regarding the participants' viewpoints and encounters concerning meaningful rewards amid the COVID-19 outbreak (Alase, 2017). Qualitative research is a method of scientific inquiry that delves into comprehensive and nuanced understandings of real-world issues by collecting data from participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research philosophy employed in this study was phenomenological in nature. Phenomenology aims to describe and analyse phenomena and their appearance (Emiliussen et al., 2021). The participants' interpretation of their experiences was articulated concerning their subjective encounters and how they encountered them (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Research strategy

A case study research approach was applied in this study. According to Rashid et al. (2019), case study research employs an observational, documentary, and interpretive approach to investigate the phenomenon by approaching the participants in a natural environment. The case study research strategy facilitated the depiction of authentic occurrences by enabling the researcher to concentrate on the conduct and interactions of individual cases within their respective contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hyett et al., 2014).

Entrée and establishing research roles

Permission was obtained from the Human Resource (HR) Director of the company to do the study. The HR Director also functioned as a gatekeeper to aid the primary researcher in obtaining access to eligible participants for the study. The primary researcher engaged with designated participants and informed them of the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. The participants were given an informed consent form to sign. Participation was voluntary and the participants could withdraw from the study should they wish to do so without any consequences.

Sampling

The target population for the study was pharmaceutical company employees who held Middle Management or Senior Management positions at the Head Office located in Gauteng province. To ensure homogeneity of the sample, the inclusion criteria included individuals from the Baby Boomer, Gen X, and Millennial generations, regardless of gender ($N = 12$). Participants were selected based on their expertise and familiarity with the pharmaceutical industry, their knowledge of the type of rewards, and must have been employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aforementioned levels facilitated the inclusion of a diverse pool of participants from various generations and genders, thereby offering valuable insights into rewards preferences during times of disruption. Table 2 provides a depiction of the sample.

Data collection method

The data were gathered by conducting interviews with participants to gain insight into their subjective feelings, perspectives, opinions and experiences (Busetto et al., 2020). This allows human behaviour to be explained by allowing participants to explain how, why or what they were thinking or feeling during the time of interest (Tenny et al., 2021). Semi-structured interviews were used in the research study, as the participants were asked open-ended questions from an interview guide, including probing questions. The interview guide utilised in the study was informed by relevant theories and prior research findings as documented in the literature (Busetto et al., 2020). The interviews were conducted through two modes of communication, namely Zoom and face-to-face, based on the participants' preferences and in compliance with the COVID-19 social distancing regulations.

Data analysis

The present study utilised inductive theme analysis as a methodological approach to examine the collected data. According to Nowell et al. (2017), the thematic analysis approach facilitates the examination of diverse viewpoints among research participants, revealing both commonalities and disparities in their perspectives, and leading to the discovery of unforeseen insights. The coding of patterns was conducted and subsequently organised into distinct themes (see Roberts et al., 2019). Using thematic analysis facilitated

TABLE 2: Description of participants based on age, generational group, career stage, life stage, gender and occupational level.

Participant unique ID	Age (years)	Gender	Generational group	Career stage	Generational life stage	Occupational level
P1-GenY-F-MM	36	Female	Millennial	Establishment	Young adulthood	Middle management
P2-GenY-M-MM	40	Male	Millennial	Establishment	Young adulthood	Middle management
P3-GenX-F-MM	46	Female	Generation X	Maintenance	Midlife	Middle management
P4-GenX-M-MM	55	Male	Generation X	Maintenance	Midlife	Middle management
P5-BB-F-MM	60	Female	Baby boomer	Decline	Elderhood	Middle management
Declined to participate	60+	Male	Baby boomer	Decline	Elderhood	Middle management
P7-GenY-F-SM	40	Female	Millennial	Establishment	Young adulthood	Senior management
P8-GenY-M-SM	31	Male	Millennial	Establishment	Young adulthood	Senior management
P9-GenX-F-SM	50	Female	Generation X	Maintenance	Midlife	Senior management
P10-GenX-M-SM	51	Male	Generation X	Maintenance	Midlife	Senior management
P11-BB-F-SM	57	Female	Baby boomer	Decline	Elderhood	Senior management
P12-BB-M-SM	61	Male	Baby boomer	Decline	Elderhood	Senior management

the researcher in elucidating and comprehending the data to deduce significance (Roberts et al., 2019) by dissecting transcripts into significant textual segments and corresponding categorisations (Nowell et al., 2017). Inductive theme analyses therefore assisted in uncovering hidden patterns that might have been overlooked and as a result enriches the research process.

Recording and storage of data

The interviews were conducted with the consent of the participants. The transcriptions of the interviews were provided to the participants to verify their accuracy. The recorded interviews and their corresponding transcriptions are securely stored in an online Cloud password-protected account. The retention period for these materials is no less than 5 years.

Ensuring the quality and rigour of the research

The study's data quality and rigour were maintained by implementing various measures, including ensuring trustworthiness, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researchers adhered to the guidelines of Hammarberg and Kirkman (2016) to ensure trustworthiness by providing a comprehensive account of the research procedure, objectives, data collection, and storage. The study's transferability was ensured by employing data triangulation, which involved utilising various primary and secondary sources, and interviewing participants from diverse cohorts to obtain a range of perspectives and experiences (Oosthuizen & Mayer, 2019). The data quality was maintained by providing comprehensive and detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences. The researcher ensures objectivity by implementing measures such as recognising and acknowledging researcher bias, documenting such bias during data analysis, and executing an iterative analysis process. As per Nowell et al.'s (2017) recommendation, the main researcher maintained a reflexive journal to record thoughts, beliefs, and insights.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg (IPPM-2021-580). The study

followed all ethical guidelines typically expected from a qualitative research investigation. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained during the research process by eliminating any personal information or identifiers from the transcripts.

Results

The findings of this study reflected the five domains of the Total Rewards Model. Five main themes were therefore identified: Compensation, Benefits, Well-being and Flexibility, Recognition, and Training and Development.

Theme 1: Compensation

The findings showed that the three generations had different views on compensation based on their age and life stage. Both male and female Baby Boomers were more cognisant of their nearing retirement and the need for extra cash. Some observations by the participants included:

'I'm close to retirement. It's obviously more on a focus on cash you know and saving towards retirement.' (Participant 11, Female, 57 years old, Senior Manager)

'At this stage my focus is more on accessible cash, as I am focussed on my retirement and investing in property.' (Participant 5, Female, 60 years old, Manager)

An interesting finding from the study was that male Gen X participants focussed more on compensation than their female counterparts to plan for retirement and their pension funds.

'[F]rom a remuneration perspective, when you ... 25 years ago, I wanted a bigger salary 'cause I wanted to buy a motorcycle, and now I want a bigger salary because I didn't provide enough for my pension, so I'd want to save more money. So the reason for the benefit can differ – but in both times, I wanted more money.' (Participant 4, Male, 55 years old, Manager)

Female Millennial participants indicated they would appreciate higher salaries as being mothers come with additional expenses and responsibilities and achieving their work deliverables. One female participant stated that men get paid higher salaries, even though she does not consider them to be the primary caregivers of their children:

'I'm a new mum, and with babies, there are always unforeseen expenses that pop up when you don't anticipate it, and it costs money to pay for that ... in that regard, that's how the higher salary will benefit me a lot better, where I can afford a break when I want to, a decent one.' (Participant 1, Female, 36 years old, Manager)

Another participant stated:

'But I can also tell you now, being a woman, mother and wife ... I still think we lack salary "cause I can put my head on a block and tell you, someone, in my same position, if it's a man, will by default get a bigger salary than I am. I'm not saying men have it easier but they, not the caregiver, plus the high position, to balance everything is not easy.' (Participant 7, Female, 40 years old, Senior Manager)

However, the male Millennial participant stated that he would also like a higher salary as he feels he does not get paid as much as someone else. He would contemplate leaving his company to earn a higher salary:

'[4]nd I think the big thing for me or the most disappointing thing about the way salary is structured, is that for you to even catch up with that person in your same job level, the only way you can do it is by leaving your company. So maybe you are happy where you are, and you don't want to leave, but you just want a corrected salary.' (Participant 8, Male, 31 years old, Senior Manager)

Theme 2: Benefits

The participants mainly indicate the importance of leave days as a work benefit. Baby Boomers emphasised the importance of having access to leave as an essential benefit as they are nearing the end of their careers. One Baby Boomer participant mentioned:

'At this stage of my life, you know, to sort of giving you this sort of, if you want to sort of motivating me, give me more leave days, you know that kind of thing ... To be honest with you, you know so, at this stage of my life, the extra time off is something that I really treasure ... If you really ask me – this is the one benefit I would like to have, to be honest. First of all, get to 65 and then be retained after 65. Before leave days, I'd even put that at the top of my wish list.' (Participant 12, Male, 61 years old, Senior Manager)

However, a Millennial participant highlighted that the workload prevents her from taking leave:

'[4]t the end of the year you get the email, and they tell you to put in leave, or you lose it, but then I have this reward, and it confuses me cos then how do I get my work done if I take the leave ... because of the backlog [*of work*]? ... You know you've got all of these rewards, but I can't use it because there is an in-balancing workload.' (Participant 7, Female, 40 years old, Senior Manager)

Millennial participants indicated the importance of medical aid as a benefit. However, some of the observations included access to various medical aid providers. As mentioned by some of the participants:

'Because we could choose between Discovery and Bonitas [*for medical aid benefit provided by the company*], but there's so many

other names... It is limited only to pick between those two. Now I can choose between Bonitas and Discovery, what about the others? The Inbetweeners, you know. So you don't really find the medical aid that's provided to us or to you at your level, is that much of a benefit. It could be better.' (Participant 7, Female, 40 years old, Senior Manager)

'Then with regards to being a parent and so forth, I think you know, having a medical aid as a benefit does help a lot.' (Participant 1, Female, 36 years old, Manager)

Theme 3: Work-life balance and flexibility

Most of the participants indicated that they suffered a lack of work-life balance while working remotely during COVID-19. Although the company's flexi-policy was implemented to improve employee work-life balance, female Baby Boomers indicated they did not have a work-life balance as working from home meant longer working hours. One female Baby Boomer indicated that because it is a global pharmaceutical company, the flexi-policy was interpreted by their global counterparts to have meetings in the evenings to accommodate their time zones:

'I find myself sitting in front of this computer from the time that I had my bath and everything sitting in front of this computer until about 6–7 o'clock [*at night*]. Global ... I think the time zones, which understand from their point of view ... the meetings are set like at 6:00 o'clock, until half past six or even at 7 [*pm*] and I do understand, but I think it's still for me something that I have to work on personally ... to force myself to have time for lunch to have time to do other things, you know to get up from the computer.' (Participant 11, Female, 57 years old, Senior Manager)

A Generation X employee struggled to balance the multiple roles she needed to fulfil (i.e., parent versus employee) because of the longer remote working hours. As mentioned by the participant:

'I'm just thinking in terms of being a parent ... I often thought yes, it would be nice if you for example, worked over a weekend or evening for your employer, for them to say OK, take three hours or the next morning off.' (Participant 3, Female, 46 years old, Manager)

Millennial employees' experience was that they had to be available the entire day, which prevents them from balancing their work-life. As mentioned by some of the participants:

'I feel like we're doing a lot more working remotely, like you know your day automatically starts earlier. You would have been on the road like maybe one or two hours out of your day, your day starts earlier and like you're expected to be available anytime, all the time.' (Participant 1, Female, 36 years old, Manager)

The participants, though, indicated that the use of technology during COVID-19 and hybrid new work arrangements enabled them to have more flexibility and they could be more productive. The hybrid work environment and new technologies enabled them to complete their tasks more

easily, instead of sitting in traffic while going to the office. Others also highlighted the benefits of attending online classes instead of face-to-face lectures. Some observations by the participants include:

'Now they just sent through lists of stuff I get hold of the docs and scan them through, and I set up the interviews, everything online so from that perspective, yes, 4IR has been great. It's given a lot more flexibility from a work perspective.' (Participant 10, Male, 51 years old, Senior Manager)

'[Z]oom, for example. I think we've never would have used it as much as we do now, without COVID, now, definitely. And yes, I mean I do prefer, I mean I don't like driving in the traffic, so for me it is a huge reward not to drive in traffic.' (Participant 3, Female, 46 years old, Manager)

'[T]here's these courses that we can offer you at no charge now, you know you don't have to be in a physical class to, you know, from a development perspective, learning, etc. You can do it online. You know you don't have to be in a physical class.' (Participant 2, Male, 40 years old, Manager)

Theme 4: Recognition

The concept of trust emerged as a central theme for recognising employees during COVID-19. Both Baby Boomer and Generation X participants indicated that they felt recognised by the fact that their managers trusted and respected them to complete their deliverables while working from home during the pandemic. As mentioned by one of the Baby Boomer participants:

'I get on exceptionally well with [my current boss], and he is somebody you can respect, and he does have experience. And he trusts you as well, and I think that's the kind of thing you're looking for in a company – if your boss doesn't trust you, you're in for a tough time.' (Participant 12, Male, 61 years old, Senior Manager)

Similarly, Generation X indicated that their managers trust them, which allowed them to have flexibility during working hours. As mentioned by some of the participants:

'I'm just realising at this level – when you're hired to do something, you should be at that level where they trust that you're going to get it done.' (Participant 10, Male, 51 years old, Senior Manager)

'I feel my manager can trust me when I say, "I'm working from home", then they know I'm working from home and I'm available when they need me.' (Participant 4, Male, 55 years old, Manager)

The participants furthermore indicated that being recognised for their contributions and value add were essential in motivating them during COVID-19. A Baby Boomer participant highlighted:

'I think people do recognise that I know what I'm doing. I have the experience and contacts in terms of the people I deal with overseas, you know, the suppliers, so I think they value my experience.' (Participant 12, Male, 61 years old, Senior Manager)

Similarly, Millennial participants indicated:

'[W]e have a lot more recognition that we're doing now that we didn't do before. I think that for me – that drives me, I value that.

My efforts and hard work are not going down the drain – someone is seeing it and acknowledging it.' (Participant 1, Female, 36 years old, Manager)

'So I'm very project based in terms of my approach to how I operate in organisations, you know, so completion of a project, having done it well, you know and so being recognised for that, whether that be a pat on the back or monetary.' (Participant 2, Male, 40 years old, Manager)

Theme 5: Training and development

The participants agreed that training and development is an important reward mechanism to contribute to their career growth and advancement. One of the Generation X participants mentioned:

'So my interest has always been more medical compared to sales, so it was mainly for my development. I mean I would have even ... I would move for a lesser salary, even for development in the medical role.' (Participant 3, Female, 46 years old, Manager)

The Millennial participants highlighted the importance of fair and transparent training and development opportunities aligning with the organisation's objectives. Some of the participants indicated:

'[The company] is willing to pay for our upskilling, and if we have a course that's in line with the business objectives, and we can give back – I think that is quite nice, I'd like to keep that as you know.' (Participant 1, Female, 36 years old, Manager)

The participant further mentions:

'I also think promotions as well, I think we as an organisation we quite good with that, although I think we can improve on it – how we develop people and not use your buddy. Not nepotism. We should not be using nepotism.' (Participant 1, Female, 36 years old, Manager)

Another participant stated:

'[I]n terms of development, you know, one wants to grow, you know you don't want to be stagnant – doing the same thing all the time – you also want exposure to ideas, to opportunities to learn as well, you know – whether it be formal or informal studying and learning so just yeah.' (Participant 2, Male, 40 years old, Manager)

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to identify meaningful rewards for employees of a pharmaceutical company during the COVID-19 pandemic. More particular, the reward preferences of pharmaceutical personnel in managing roles were investigated in terms of age and gender. Using the TRM as a foundation, we discovered that all dimensions are related to pandemic participants. In what follows, we discuss how different gender and age groups perceived total rewards relating to remuneration, benefits, well-being, recognition, and training and development during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings show that both male and female Baby Boomers underlined the importance of income in providing for their

upcoming retirement. A male Baby Boomer expressed preference for long-term investments to fund his retirement. These findings support Rajkumar (2014) who found that Baby Boomers appreciate remuneration and long-term rewards. In line with Pregnolato et al. (2017), male Generation X participants were motivated by pay and long-term benefits to provide for the family's needs and later retirement. In this study, female Millennial participants placed a high premium on salary for family needs since a higher salary is required to meet additional costs to support childcare responsibilities and cost of living. As proposed by Super's theory, interdependence between work-life roles leads to conflicts and stress (see O'Neill & Jepsen, 2019), as evidenced among the female Millennial participants in the present study. These findings contrast with previous research indicating that women are less motivated by remuneration than men (see Maxwell, 2020; Pregnolato et al., 2017). Irrespective of the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings for gender combined still confirmed the majority of previous findings relating to pay and benefits.

The findings further indicate that women continue to engage in negotiations regarding their benefits and well-being based on considerations related to childcare and familial obligations. The significance of medical aid as a benefit and flexible working arrangements to accommodate work and family obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic were emphasised by female Millennials. Remote work arrangements, though, presented a challenge for female Baby Boomers and Generation X, as they strive to balance the various roles they are required to fulfil their personal and professional lives. Kot et al. (2020) posit that maintaining equilibrium between roles is crucial, particularly in crises and significant life changes. According to Robitschek and Hardin (2017), successfully integrating various life roles can lead to a sense of purpose and accomplishment in individuals, resulting in a positive outlook towards their professional pursuits. Koekemoer and Crafford (2019) assert that achieving long-term career success among Millennial employees is contingent upon achieving work-life balance and pursuing meaningful careers.

The present study's results confirmed that women prefer smaller and more frequent rewards (see Cornwall et al., 2018). These rewards included flexible scheduling, personal time off, and meaningful work experiences (see Incentive Research Foundation, 2020), particularly in times of crisis. Both male and female Generation X and Millennial members expressed a favourable outlook towards how technology facilitated productivity and flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic and acquiring new knowledge through online training. These findings are encouraging and support the significance of incorporating technologies to enable and augment pharmacists' professional proficiency and capabilities (Lynch & O'Leary, 2021). Furthermore, the findings call into question conventional assumptions that technology is exclusively the domain of younger generations, disregarding the potential digital interests and advantages that technology can provide to older generations, including Generation X (see Okros, 2020; Wong & Rasdi, 2019).

Regarding recognition, male Baby Boomers and male Generation X employees perceived that their line management trusted them for their competence in executing their work. These results align with the findings of the Incentive Research Foundation (2020), highlighting the need for males to be promoted to a position with more responsibility and be recognised as top performers. Female Millennials also indicated that they had been recognised in tangible (i.e., monetary) and intangible (i.e., appreciation) ways by management and peers. These results showed the importance of a compassionate (see Pattnaik & Padhi, 2022) and socio-psychological (i.e., managerial and collegial support; encouragement and feedback) approach towards rewarding healthcare employees (see Abdullah et al., 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To summarise, Millennial employees were primarily motivated by compelling rewards amid the pandemic in terms of age and career stage. More specifically, Millennials preferred all five facets of Total Rewards, when considered in conjunction with their gender. These findings are significant as Millennial employees are more driven to find meaning in their work (see Lepojevic et al., 2018). In general, the female participants were more inclined towards all the rewards than their male counterparts. The most preferred rewards among individuals were remuneration, well-being, and recognition, whereas training and development were comparatively less favoured.

Practical implications

The present study holds several practical implications. The research findings indicate that implementing a comprehensive rewards approach would be most effective in addressing the needs of Millennial workers during periods of uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted female Millennial employees, particularly regarding increased childcare responsibilities and living costs. Arguably, Millennials represent the pipeline and potential future leaders of pharmaceutical companies. To retain younger employees, it may be beneficial for these companies to implement hybrid work environments and provide additional childcare benefits. Female Baby Boomers and Generation X workers also highlighted the significance of increased compensation for family and childcare necessities. The observation that female groups tend to prioritise family responsibilities suggests that traditional gender roles have not yet achieved parity. Hence, it is imperative to consider the social milieu while formulating a comprehensive compensation package that is suitable and efficacious. The study revealed that integrating digital technology in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and implementing flexible work schedules were widely accepted across all age groups. This finding challenges the prevailing stereotype that the Millennial generation exclusively favours such practices. Hence, incorporating a digital ecosystem and systematic integration of all generational cohorts can be highly advantageous for pharmaceutical companies to fully leverage the benefits of the 4IR. Concerning acknowledgement, it was apparent that Millennials emphasised empathetic incentives and a more person-centred method of recognising their contributions. The findings underscore the significance of

leadership prioritising human-centred values such as trust, appreciation, interpersonal connections, and collaborative teamwork. Ultimately, while the Millennial cohort places a high degree of importance on training and development, it is crucial to recognise the significance of upskilling individuals from other generations to enhance their employability and equip them with the digital competencies necessary for success in the contemporary labour landscape. Pharmaceutical corporations can allocate resources towards online and blended learning platforms to guarantee that all personnel, regardless of age or gender, obtain the necessary occupational competencies.

Limitations and recommendations

The study is not without limitations. Firstly, despite abundant research on rewards during the COVID-19 pandemic, there remains a dearth of studies examining total rewards in the pharmaceutical industry from both gender and age perspectives. The aforementioned outcome leads to a noteworthy disparity in accessibility, thereby restricting the researchers' ability to deduce inferences from an extant empirical basis. Secondly, the study employed a qualitative methodology, particularly on a targeted group of individuals from a pharmaceutical organisation within a defined geographic location. Consequently, the outcomes do not apply to other pharmaceutical organisations in different geographical areas. Thirdly, the research was conducted using a cross-sectional design and was limited to a single point during a pandemic. The current study is constrained by the time limitations imposed by the pandemic, precluding the researchers from drawing causal inferences over an extended duration to identify patterns. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of reward preferences during times of crisis, it is advisable for future research to broaden the sample to include additional pharmaceutical companies and regions. Future research recommendations entail the execution of a quantitative or mixed-method research inquiry to guarantee the generalisability of the research outcomes. An additional suggestion would be to investigate with a diverse pool of participants from various organisations to acquire a more extensive spectrum of perspectives.

Conclusions

The outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated a shift in numerous entities' human resource management strategies amid a tumultuous work environment. The present study centred on the significance of rewards as a crucial factor in recruiting and retaining skilled personnel amid the COVID-19 crisis. The study's results prompt researchers and practitioners to reconsider conventional characteristics and incentive inclinations of distinct age cohorts and gender categories, which have undergone modifications because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Hence, management and practitioners must formulate a comprehensive rewards approach that considers the needs of employees in the contemporary work environment. This, in turn, can foster a sense of meaningfulness and dedication towards the organisational objectives.

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Authors' contributions

T.A. was involved in the conceptualisation of the research and E.N.B. and C.M. responsible for the review and editing of the article and supervision. E.N.B. was responsible for the conceptualisation of the research, methodology, data analysis and C.M. responsible writing of the discussion and conclusion.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, E.N.B., upon reasonable request.

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