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Identifying the Challenges of the Employee Recruitment Process in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Operating in the Food Industry and Located in Afghanistan's Industrial Parks

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify and explain the challenges associated with employee recruitment in food-industry enterprises located in Afghanistan's industrial parks. The study adopted a qualitative and inductive approach grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes subjectivity, social interaction, and the interpretation of meaning. A phenomenographic research strategy was selected to examine the lived experiences of experts and human resource managers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis with the assistance of MAXQDA software. The study population consisted of experts and senior human resource managers with at least 10 years of professional experience. Purposive and snowball sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. To establish the trustworthiness of the findings, several techniques were employed, including member checking, constant data comparison, detailed documentation of the research stages, and the provision of a rich description of the research context. Accordingly, the study provided a foundation for an in-depth examination of the challenges associated with inappropriate employee recruitment. The findings indicated that a total of 15 components and 78 categories were identified. The components included institutional, governance, and company macro-environment challenges; structural and systemic challenges in the recruitment process; managerial and leadership challenges in the recruitment process; workforce skill-related challenges; economic and financial challenges affecting the recruitment process; infrastructural and technological challenges in the recruitment process; cultural, social, and ethical challenges associated with recruitment and hiring; challenges related to the localization of the recruitment process; political challenges and human resource risks in recruitment and promotion; challenges in the employee attraction and selection process before hiring; challenges related to standards, regulations, and compliance during recruitment; communication and employer-branding challenges; legitimacy and trust challenges during recruitment; and challenges associated with recruiting applicants with low levels of literacy. The results demonstrated that identifying these challenges, which essentially involves recognizing the existing problems, can contribute to improving the development of employee attraction and recruitment processes.

Keywords: employee recruitment process challenges, recruitment and hiring system, small and medium-sized enterprises, Afghanistan's industrial parks

Introduction

Human resources constitute one of the most consequential strategic assets of contemporary organizations because the quality, continuity, and adaptability of the workforce directly affect productivity, innovation, service quality, operational resilience, and organizational competitiveness. Within the broader domain of human resource management, recruitment and selection represent the primary mechanisms through which organizations gain access to the knowledge, skills, capabilities,

attitudes, and behavioral characteristics required to implement their strategies. Recruitment refers not merely to advertising vacancies or filling vacant positions, but to a multidimensional process involving workforce planning, job analysis, employer communication, applicant attraction, screening, assessment, selection, placement, and the initial establishment of the employment relationship. When these activities are designed strategically, recruitment can contribute to improved person–job fit, person–organization fit, employee performance, retention, and organizational effectiveness. Conversely, poorly structured recruitment may result in the employment of individuals who lack the required competencies, increased training and supervision costs, operational errors, employee dissatisfaction, premature turnover, and damage to the organization’s reputation. Evidence from strategic human resource management research indicates that recruitment and selection should therefore be treated as integrated organizational capabilities rather than isolated administrative procedures [1]. Research conducted in organizational settings has similarly demonstrated that weaknesses in job analysis, candidate assessment, procedural consistency, and selection criteria can reduce the effectiveness of recruitment decisions and adversely affect workforce quality [2].

The strategic importance of recruitment is especially pronounced in small and medium-sized enterprises because such enterprises generally operate with limited financial, technological, and managerial resources and cannot easily absorb the costs of inappropriate hiring. Unlike large corporations, which may possess specialized human resource departments, formalized applicant-tracking systems, extensive employer-branding resources, and established talent pipelines, small and medium-sized enterprises frequently rely on owners, production managers, or administrative personnel to perform recruitment activities alongside their principal responsibilities. Consequently, recruitment decisions may be based on personal judgment, informal referrals, immediate operational needs, and limited information rather than systematic workforce planning and evidence-based assessment. The consequences of a single inappropriate appointment may be particularly severe in a small enterprise because each employee often performs multiple tasks, occupies a substantial proportion of the organization’s human capital, and directly influences production continuity. Strategic examinations of recruitment and selection have emphasized that organizations require clear recruitment planning, competency-based criteria, structured assessment methods, and alignment between hiring decisions and organizational objectives [3]. In addition, specialized recruitment frameworks indicate that the selection of nonmanagerial and support personnel should be differentiated according to occupational requirements rather than governed by a uniform and generalized procedure [4]. These considerations are particularly relevant to small and medium-sized enterprises operating in labor markets where formal human resource institutions remain underdeveloped.

The food industry presents additional recruitment complexities because its workforce must satisfy both general organizational requirements and sector-specific technical, health, safety, and quality standards. Food-processing enterprises require employees who can operate production equipment, comply with hygiene protocols, handle raw materials appropriately, maintain accurate production records, identify contamination risks, and contribute to quality-control procedures. Technical positions may require competence in machinery operation, preventive maintenance, packaging technologies, laboratory procedures, product formulation, or industrial safety. Even comparatively low-skilled positions require basic literacy, procedural discipline, attention to detail, and the capacity to follow standardized instructions. Therefore, deficiencies in recruitment can directly affect not only organizational efficiency but also food quality, consumer safety, regulatory compliance, and production sustainability. Studies of recruitment in specialized healthcare and medical-

record environments demonstrate that workforce recruitment must be aligned with occupational standards, technical responsibilities, organizational workflow, and service-quality requirements [5]. Likewise, reviews of recruitment, retention, and workforce development in healthcare show that sector-specific labor shortages, limited professional development, inadequate incentives, and weak organizational support can interact to produce persistent staffing problems [6]. Although food production differs from healthcare, both fields illustrate the importance of recruiting employees who can perform technically sensitive tasks within environments governed by safety and quality requirements.

Contemporary labor markets have further intensified the challenge by increasing demand for combinations of technical, cognitive, interpersonal, and digital competencies. Employers no longer seek only formal qualifications or narrow occupational skills; they increasingly require hybrid skill sets that combine technical knowledge with problem-solving, communication, teamwork, adaptability, digital literacy, and continuous learning. Research on recruitment decisions in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution demonstrates that employers assess graduates according to integrated technical and nontechnical competencies and that mismatches between educational outcomes and workplace requirements can constrain hiring decisions [7]. This issue is particularly important in developing labor markets, where vocational education, university curricula, and industry requirements may not be adequately aligned. Comparative analyses of recruitment and training systems have similarly shown that effective workforce development depends on coherent relationships among selection standards, training institutions, professional preparation, and employment systems [8]. When educational and industrial systems operate independently, enterprises may face an apparent abundance of applicants while simultaneously experiencing a shortage of individuals who possess the competencies required for available positions.

The availability of applicants alone therefore does not guarantee successful recruitment. Organizations must be capable of communicating employment opportunities, reaching suitable target groups, creating accessible application procedures, and evaluating candidates fairly. Research on the recruitment of underrepresented populations demonstrates that recruitment methodologies influence who becomes aware of opportunities, who participates, and which groups remain excluded [9]. Although that research concerns participation in genetic and epigenetic studies rather than organizational hiring, its methodological implication is relevant: recruitment channels and communication approaches shape the composition and inclusiveness of the candidate pool. Organizations that depend exclusively on narrow personal networks or inaccessible formal announcements may fail to reach women, rural applicants, individuals with limited literacy, younger workers, or technically skilled candidates outside established networks. Inclusive recruitment also requires interview practices that minimize interpersonal bias and enable applicants from diverse backgrounds to demonstrate their competencies. Digital simulation and intelligent-human technologies have been proposed as tools for training interviewers to conduct more inclusive recruitment interviews and to improve awareness of diversity-related biases [10]. In settings characterized by ethnic, regional, gender-based, or social divisions, the fairness and inclusiveness of recruitment practices become central to both workforce quality and organizational legitimacy.

Meritocracy, transparency, and good governance are consequently fundamental requirements of an effective recruitment system. Recruitment processes that lack explicit eligibility criteria, standardized assessments, documented decisions, and accountability mechanisms are vulnerable to favoritism, political interference, personal relationships, and discriminatory practices. Such weaknesses can undermine applicants' trust, reduce organizational legitimacy, and prevent qualified individuals from entering the workforce. Research on bureaucratic recruitment argues that an ideal meritocratic system

should be grounded in good-governance principles, including transparency, accountability, impartiality, competence, and procedural consistency [11]. These principles are not restricted to public-sector recruitment; they are equally applicable to private enterprises seeking to establish credible and efficient hiring systems. Where formal governance is weak, personal connections may substitute for verified competencies, and recruitment decisions may become difficult to justify or evaluate. The resulting perception of unfairness can damage employer reputation even when some individual decisions are technically appropriate. In addition, recruitment systems that are not aligned with labor regulations, occupational standards, and ethical expectations may expose organizations to legal, reputational, and operational risks.

Recruitment effectiveness is also inseparable from retention. Attracting employees is of limited value when organizations cannot provide sufficient job security, professional support, fair treatment, career development, or working conditions to retain them. Studies of teacher recruitment and retention show that workforce shortages are shaped by contextual factors such as organizational climate, geographic conditions, professional isolation, support structures, and perceived opportunities for development [12]. Research on Latinx teachers similarly indicates that recruitment initiatives may fail to produce sustainable workforce diversity when newly appointed employees encounter exclusion, weak support, or organizational conditions that encourage departure [13]. These findings demonstrate that recruitment should be evaluated as part of a broader employment cycle that includes onboarding, development, performance management, motivation, and retention. In small and medium-sized food-industry enterprises, delayed salaries, unsafe conditions, limited promotion opportunities, inadequate recognition, and weak employee–management communication may reduce the attractiveness of available positions and contribute to repeated cycles of recruitment and turnover.

Coordination among organizations, educational institutions, governmental agencies, and labor-market intermediaries is another critical determinant of recruitment capacity. Intersectoral collaboration can improve workforce education, recruitment, deployment, and retention by aligning training supply with occupational demand and enabling different institutions to share information and resources [14]. For industrial enterprises, such collaboration may involve partnerships with universities, vocational institutes, employment agencies, chambers of commerce, labor authorities, and other companies operating within the same industrial zone. These partnerships can support internship programs, technical training, shared labor-market databases, job fairs, and the development of industry-specific competency standards. In the absence of such relationships, enterprises must independently search for employees in a fragmented labor market, while educational institutions remain poorly informed about changing industrial needs. Recruitment consequently becomes reactive, expensive, and uncertain rather than planned and collaborative.

Employer branding and organizational attractiveness have also become essential components of talent acquisition. Applicants assess not only wages and job availability but also organizational reputation, fairness, developmental opportunities, workplace culture, technological sophistication, and the manner in which the organization uses personal data. Recent research indicates that candidates' perceptions of artificial intelligence and digital-data use in recruitment can influence organizational attractiveness, particularly when applicants evaluate whether technologies are transparent, useful, intrusive, or fair [15]. This finding underscores the broader principle that recruitment practices communicate information about the organization itself. Slow responses, unclear announcements, disrespectful interviews, lost applications, and unexplained decisions may signal disorder and reduce applicants' willingness to accept employment. Conversely, transparent communication and professionally managed recruitment can strengthen the employer brand even among unsuccessful

applicants. For small and medium-sized enterprises competing with larger organizations, migration opportunities, public institutions, and international employers, a credible employer identity can be a decisive factor in attracting scarce technical talent.

Digital transformation has significantly changed the tools available for recruitment and selection. Applicant-tracking systems, online employment platforms, digital résumé databases, automated communication, algorithmic screening, virtual interviews, and predictive analytics can reduce administrative burdens and increase the speed and reach of recruitment. Reviews of artificial intelligence in talent acquisition suggest that AI can support candidate sourcing, résumé screening, competency matching, interview scheduling, and decision support, although its implementation also creates concerns related to bias, transparency, privacy, and overreliance on automated judgments [16]. Artificial intelligence has similarly been identified as a means of improving recruitment and selection in public-sector organizations by increasing efficiency, standardization, and data-informed decision-making [17]. In the oil and gas industry, AI-based recruitment applications have been associated with enhanced candidate identification and process efficiency, while ethical governance and human oversight remain necessary [18]. Research focused on smart human resource attraction further suggests that AI-enabled recruitment can contribute to organizational performance when technological tools are aligned with strategic human resource objectives [19].

Machine-learning classification models can also be used to predict recruitment decisions by identifying patterns across applicant characteristics and prior hiring outcomes [20]. However, the value of these technologies depends on data quality, infrastructure, user capability, and organizational acceptance. A sophisticated model cannot compensate for inaccurate job descriptions, incomplete applicant information, biased historical data, or the absence of clear selection standards. User acceptance is also crucial. A framework based on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology has shown that expected performance, effort, facilitating conditions, and social influence can shape the intention to adopt artificial intelligence in human resource recruitment [21]. Consequently, digitalization is not merely a matter of purchasing software; it requires reliable internet access, digital literacy, managerial commitment, secure data practices, appropriate training, and organizational readiness. In resource-constrained industrial settings, even basic digital databases and standardized electronic forms may represent a substantial advancement over fragmented paper-based procedures.

At the organizational level, the integration of artificial intelligence requires dynamic capabilities that enable firms to reconfigure routines, combine human judgment with technological analysis, and create value through effective human–AI collaboration [22]. Recruitment technologies should therefore support rather than replace accountable managerial judgment. Automated tools may accelerate screening, but contextual understanding remains necessary when applicants possess nontraditional experience, limited formal education, or practical skills that are difficult to represent in written résumés. This is particularly relevant in Afghanistan, where many potentially capable workers may have acquired competencies informally and may be disadvantaged by highly formalized digital systems. The challenge is to develop recruitment systems that are simultaneously more systematic and more context-sensitive.

It is also necessary to clarify that the concept of “recruitment” is used differently across academic disciplines. In neuroscience, recruitment may refer to the activation or engagement of particular brain regions rather than the attraction of employees. For example, research has examined how state shyness is associated with increased recruitment of social-processing regions and reduced communication among prefrontal regulatory regions [23]. Other work has linked parent–

child similarity in amygdala activation to prefrontal recruitment and emotional adaptation among young people [24]. These studies do not address organizational staffing, but their inclusion highlights the importance of defining recruitment precisely within a study. In the present research, recruitment refers exclusively to the organizational process of identifying workforce needs, attracting job applicants, evaluating their qualifications, selecting suitable candidates, and initiating employment within small and medium-sized food-industry enterprises.

The context of Afghanistan adds a distinctive combination of institutional, economic, technological, cultural, and political constraints to these general recruitment challenges. Small and medium-sized enterprises located in industrial parks may operate under regulatory uncertainty, limited access to finance, shortages of specialized labor, fragile infrastructure, weak relationships with educational institutions, and restricted use of digital human resource systems. Cultural expectations may constrain women's labor-force participation, while local power structures and personal networks may influence hiring decisions. Applicants may possess limited formal literacy or digital skills, even when they have relevant practical capabilities. Enterprises may also face difficulties verifying credentials, conducting security screening, designing standardized interviews, maintaining applicant records, and establishing reliable compensation and retention systems. In such an environment, recruitment problems cannot be explained solely as deficiencies in individual managerial competence. They reflect the interaction of organizational structures with wider governance systems, labor-market characteristics, social norms, economic pressures, and technological conditions.

Despite the growing body of international research on strategic recruitment, merit-based selection, artificial intelligence, workforce skills, inclusion, employer attractiveness, and retention, limited empirical attention has been directed toward the integrated recruitment challenges experienced by small and medium-sized food-industry enterprises in Afghanistan's industrial parks. Existing studies often examine recruitment within public administration, education, healthcare, construction, or technologically advanced industries, while the specific realities of Afghan food-processing enterprises remain insufficiently documented. Moreover, technological solutions developed in more stable and highly digitalized environments cannot be directly transferred to settings characterized by weak infrastructure, informal labor-market practices, low applicant literacy, institutional fragmentation, and political uncertainty. An in-depth qualitative investigation is therefore necessary to capture the experiences of human resource experts and senior managers and to identify how institutional, structural, managerial, technical, financial, cultural, technological, political, communicative, and legitimacy-related challenges interact throughout the recruitment process.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to identify and explain the challenges of the employee recruitment process in small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the food industry and located in Afghanistan's industrial parks.

Methodology

The methodology of this study was designed according to a qualitative and inductive approach aimed at discovering and explaining employee recruitment challenges in Afghanistan's food industry. The research philosophy was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes subjectivity, social interaction, and the interpretation of meaning and is consistent with a subjective ontology, an interactive epistemology, and an inductive methodology. This approach allowed the researcher to become deeply immersed in the data and to identify the challenges of the recruitment process with precision. A phenomenographic research strategy was adopted to examine the lived experiences of experts and human resource

managers. This strategy enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences through semi-structured interviews. The study population consisted of experts and senior human resource managers working in food-industry companies located in Afghanistan's industrial parks. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to select individuals with extensive and relevant experience. The selection criteria included holding a key organizational position, being recommended by other participants, possessing sufficient knowledge and experience, representing diverse professional backgrounds, and agreeing to participate in the study.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed, and significant statements were highlighted to facilitate more detailed analysis. The interview transcripts were then examined using thematic analysis. MAXQDA software was used to organize and document the data more systematically. The data-analysis process involved open and selective coding, ultimately leading to the extraction of the principal themes and categories. During open coding, the data were divided into smaller conceptual units. During selective coding, convergent codes were classified under broader themes. This process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that newly collected data no longer added novel information to the existing categories. The four trustworthiness criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln were applied to establish the rigor of the study. First, credibility was ensured through repeated data review, constant comparison, and returning the findings to participants for confirmation. Second, dependability was established by accurately recording the research stages, fully documenting the interviews, and using specialized qualitative data-analysis software. Third, transferability was facilitated by providing a rich description of the research context and participants' circumstances, enabling other researchers to apply the findings in similar settings. Fourth, confirmability was strengthened through the comprehensive documentation of the researcher's decisions and the incorporation of feedback from academic experts.

Findings and Results

The following table presents the qualitative findings obtained from the interviews.

Table 1

Research Findings

Categories	Component
Weak institutional governance in recruitment; regulatory and administrative instability in governance; limited institutional transparency and accountability; limited institutional capacity for human resource management	Institutional, governance, and company macro-environment challenges
Weak human resource structure; inadequate workforce planning; weak performance appraisal system; weak employee retention system; limited human resource digitalization	Structural and systemic challenges in the recruitment process
Weak organizational communication; lack of meritocracy; weak human resource management; deficiencies in the managerial selection process	Managerial and leadership challenges in the recruitment process
Limited availability of skilled labor; technical skills gap; food-industry knowledge gap; dependence on the knowledge of foreign specialists; brain drain and depletion of the talent pool; weak human resource marketing capabilities; inadequate workforce quality management	Workforce skill-related challenges
Corporate financial difficulties; weak job security; inadequate reward systems	Economic and financial challenges affecting the recruitment process
Inadequate technological infrastructure; limited digitalization of recruitment; weak internal control systems; ineffective time management in recruitment	Infrastructural and technological challenges in the recruitment process
Challenges associated with recruiting women; social problems affecting recruitment; discrimination and injustice in recruitment; weak corporate social responsibility; inadequate ethical and humane conduct; weak organizational ethics in follow-up practices; weak learning culture	Cultural, social, and ethical challenges associated with recruitment and hiring
Inadequate cultural localization of recruitment; insufficient instrumental and linguistic localization; inadequate localization of recruitment sources; structural misalignment between recruitment processes and the local environment	Challenges related to the localization of the recruitment process

Inadequate incentive systems for human resource managers; weak nonfinancial incentive systems; inadequate security screening; employee operational and environmental risks; weaknesses in workforce continuity and succession planning; safety-related and social pressures on recruitment	Political challenges and human resource risks in recruitment and promotion
Weak dissemination of recruitment information; inadequate internal referral networks; limited relationships with universities; limited relationships with employment agencies; weak proactive recruitment; inadequate human resource data analytics; poor résumé management; weak interview processes; inadequate screening processes; applicants' behavioral problems; weak employee exit processes	Challenges in employee attraction and selection before hiring
Weak industry-specific recruitment standards; inadequate compliance with labor laws; weak recruitment risk management; limited organizational adaptability	Challenges related to standards, regulations, and compliance during recruitment
Weak employer branding; limited interorganizational communication; inadequate employee relationship management	Communication and employer-branding challenges
Public distrust of recruitment; insufficient transparency and accountability in the process; limited social and ethical legitimacy; discrimination and social tension affecting recruitment legitimacy	Legitimacy and trust challenges during recruitment
Low levels of basic literacy among job applicants; weak foundational skills learning; technological skills gap	Challenges associated with recruiting applicants with low levels of literacy

Institutional, Governance, and Company Macro-Environment Challenges

The recruitment process in small and medium-sized food-industry enterprises located in Afghanistan's industrial parks is confronted with a range of structural and institutional challenges that hinder the establishment of an efficient and professional recruitment system. These challenges occur at four levels: institutional governance, regulatory stability, administrative transparency, and managerial capacity. At the first level, weak institutional governance is evident in the absence of coordination among key institutions, such as the Ministry of Labor and the Chamber of Industries. This lack of interaction has resulted in duplicated activities and confusion among employers. As one interviewee explained, "The absence of a formal and standardized human resource system and the lack of coordination among the responsible institutions have left companies uncertain about how to manage workforce recruitment." In an environment where companies require coherent support to stabilize their operations, this absence of institutional integration has transformed recruitment from a systematic procedure into an everyday organizational challenge.

At the second level, regulatory and administrative instability represents the primary barrier to predictability for employers. Frequent changes in directives and conflicts between local and central regulations have created considerable apprehension regarding sudden policy changes. This ambiguous situation has caused many processes to remain traditional. As emphasized in the interviews, "The absence of clear and specific recruitment laws, regulations, and procedures is one of our greatest concerns. In practice, the lack of transparent regulations, even regarding the employment of foreign nationals, has created numerous legal challenges." The third challenge concerns limited transparency and accountability. The absence of monitoring and reporting mechanisms has allowed a relationship-based recruitment culture to prevail over merit-based selection, particularly when formal job advertisements are not published. The interview evidence indicated that "When there is no transparent evaluation system and no formal recruitment announcement is published, recruitment becomes relationship-based, which severely undermines fairness in hiring."

Finally, limited institutional capacity for human resource management is evident at both the macro level, involving supporting institutions, and the micro level, within individual companies. Reliance on personal relationships rather than specialized human resource structures has hindered the recruitment of skilled employees. This shortage is particularly evident in the food industry, where skilled technicians are required. One interviewee stated, "There is an abundant labor supply in Afghanistan's labor market, but finding specialized and skilled workers is difficult. Because we do not have a specialized human resource unit, we cannot conduct professional interviews." This combination of structural and institutional weaknesses has created an environment in which recruitment is not based on growth strategies but is instead undertaken in

response to immediate needs and under the influence of environmental constraints. This situation constitutes a major impediment to industrial development in Afghanistan's industrial parks.

Structural and Systemic Challenges in the Recruitment Process

An analysis of the recruitment structures and systems of small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the food industry and located in Afghanistan's industrial parks reveals a profound systemic deficiency that reduces the attraction and deployment of human resources from a strategic activity to a reactive and crisis-driven response. These structural and systemic challenges are manifested in five interrelated areas: weak human resource structures, inadequate workforce planning, weak performance appraisal systems, inadequate retention systems, and limited digitalization. First, deficiencies in the human resource structure form the foundation of these problems. In most of these companies, traditional management practices and reliance on the individual decisions of business owners mean that no independent and formally established human resource department exists. Consequently, essential people-management responsibilities lack specialized oversight. The absence of documented job descriptions, written recruitment standards, scientifically designed evaluation forms, and a clearly defined organizational structure has effectively transformed interviews into subjective and nonstandardized conversations. One interviewee described this structural disorder as follows: "We do not have anything that could be called a human resources department. When we need a worker or a technical operator, the production manager or I, as the factory owner, speak with the applicant. There is no scientific evaluation form or written job description against which the person can be assessed. Everything is based on assumptions and personal experience." This structural deficiency not only reduces the systematic nature of the recruitment process but also facilitates the entry of individuals who lack the necessary qualifications into sensitive food-production lines, where compliance with health and safety standards requires precise behavioral and technical assessments.

All these traditional challenges are intensified by the failure to use modern technologies and the limited digitalization of human resource management. In an era in which digital tools have accelerated recruitment processes, companies located in Afghanistan's industrial parks continue to rely on paper-based procedures and physical filing systems. The absence of applicant tracking systems, digital résumé databases, online job-application forms, and automated communication systems has made résumé screening extremely time-consuming, disorganized, and prone to error. Interview evidence indicated that "All our documents are physically stored in folders. When a résumé arrives, it becomes lost among the administrative paperwork. We have no digital system or database for archiving applicants' records or automatically communicating with them. This makes the recruitment process extremely slow and exhausting." This technological backwardness prevents companies from engaging with the labor market in an agile manner and from identifying suitable résumés at the appropriate time. Consequently, the interaction of these five structural and systemic weaknesses has undermined recruitment efficiency in Afghanistan's food industry and has created fundamental obstacles to the sustainable development of these enterprises in a competitive environment.

Managerial and Leadership Challenges in the Recruitment Process

The attraction and deployment of human resources in food-industry companies located in Afghanistan's industrial parks are affected by structural disorder resulting from the absence of coherent communication and managerial infrastructures. This situation ultimately reduces productivity and the quality of human capital. These problems are manifested through weak organizational communication, the absence of meritocracy, and deficiencies in strategic human resource management. At

the first level, weak organizational communication has created disconnected organizational silos. The failure to hold coordination meetings concerning recruitment and the interruption of functional communication between the human resource unit and operational departments, such as production and finance, prevent the actual staffing requirements of production lines from being properly communicated to recruitment personnel. When shift managers do not communicate workforce shortages to the principal decision-makers, production crises caused by understaffing accumulate rather than being resolved promptly. One food-factory manager explained, “Our communication is primarily verbal and informal. We do not hold recruitment coordination meetings, nor do we receive transparent reports indicating how many employees, with which specializations, are actually needed for each shift. Everything remains obscured by incomplete information and inadequate communication.” The absence of formal communication channels wastes time and causes inconsistencies in the allocation of financial resources for new hires because the finance department remains unaware of urgent recruitment requirements.

At a broader level, these inconsistencies arise from the absence of meritocracy within the organizational culture, which is manifested in relationship-based recruitment and subjective decision-making. In the absence of explicit competency criteria and healthy competitive systems, employees are often selected not on the basis of knowledge and technical skills but according to ethnic, regional, and personal relationships. This traditional approach, which is compatible with the managerial culture prevailing in some Afghan workplaces, makes fair evaluation impossible. One interviewee candidly described this subjective environment as follows: “Most recruitment decisions are made on the basis of referrals and personal connections rather than résumés and individual capabilities. We have no test or criterion showing whether someone is genuinely qualified for a position. Being connected to someone within the organization is often sufficient, and this has almost entirely eliminated fairness in recruitment.” This noncompetitive environment prevents technically skilled individuals from entering the food industry and institutionalizes a culture of intermediation rather than merit-based advancement.

This situation is rooted in weak strategic human resource management, in which senior managers adopt a short-term, reactive, and nonforward-looking perspective toward recruitment. The absence of long-term planning, inadequate human resource risk management, and limited capacity for data analysis have made companies highly vulnerable to sudden labor-market changes and economic fluctuations within industrial parks. This challenge becomes more serious when the managerial selection process itself is affected by fundamental weaknesses. Selecting managers on the basis of long tenure, which does not necessarily indicate effectiveness, or close relationships with company owners, without using behavioral interviews, managerial assessments, or leadership competency evaluations, produces managerial layers that lack the capacity to lead specialized teams. Interview evidence indicated that “Our management lacks any strategic perspective toward the future. We recruit only to meet today’s immediate needs. Even when selecting managers for key departments, we use no criterion other than long work experience, and we do not employ modern management techniques such as behavioral interviews. Consequently, incorrect decisions at the top of the managerial hierarchy disrupt the entire recruitment and retention cycle.” This chain of communication weaknesses, inadequate meritocracy, and absence of managerial strategy has ultimately placed companies in a state of organizational stagnation in which they merely struggle with the consequences of poor decisions rather than optimizing the recruitment process.

Workforce Skill-Related Challenges

Within the ecosystem of the food industry located in Afghanistan's industrial parks, the recruitment process has reached a serious impasse caused by the limited availability of skilled labor. This problem arises from the substantial gap between the available labor supply and the industry's complex technical requirements. Food-production factories urgently require skilled technicians, operators capable of working with automated machinery, quality-control specialists, and laboratory experts to maintain quality and remain competitive. However, during recruitment, these companies encounter a severe shortage of qualified applicants. The challenge becomes more acute when companies are also unable to recruit specialists in packaging and industrial machinery maintenance. One production manager expressed this concern as follows: "For production lines worth millions of dollars, we cannot find even one operator capable of working with the control panels. Our labor market is full of unskilled workers, but when we seek technical specialists who possess even the most basic maintenance and repair skills, virtually no suitable applicants are available." This shortage forces companies either to incur substantial retraining costs or to tolerate losses resulting from machinery breakdowns, thereby slowing their production processes.

The limited availability of specialists is itself rooted in the technical skills gap. Recruited applicants generally lack the ability to operate automated equipment, precisely configure machinery, and apply preventive maintenance principles. In the sensitive food industry, where precision in packaging and quality control is essential, employees' lack of mastery over industrial processes leads directly to substantial waste and deterioration in final-product quality. In addition to the technical skills gap, a food-industry knowledge gap constitutes another significant obstacle. Many recruited employees have no knowledge of product formulation, rigorous health standards, or the principles of raw-material storage. A laboratory specialist described the situation as follows: "Most applicants do not even understand the difference between basic health standards and complex laboratory requirements. We must teach them food-hygiene principles from the beginning. This absence of prerequisite knowledge transforms recruitment into a lengthy and expensive training program that many companies cannot afford."

This situation is exacerbated by weak human resource marketing capabilities. Because companies do not properly understand applicants' needs, they are unable to attract highly talented individuals and lack a culture based on respect for applicants and orderly recruitment procedures. The absence of teamwork in recruitment and the inability to develop an employer brand mean that companies do not select the most qualified applicants but instead accept individuals who apply primarily out of necessity. Finally, deficiencies in workforce quality management further aggravate these problems. The absence of transparent criteria for periodically monitoring employee quality and the lack of performance standards mean that employees' skills do not improve over time and may instead gradually deteriorate. As one human resource manager explained, "We do not even have an evaluation system to determine how much the skills of individuals recruited last year have improved. Without monitoring workforce quality, performance standards within the factory decline every day, trapping us in a closed cycle of inadequate knowledge and low skill levels." This combination of workforce shortages, skills gaps, dependence on foreign expertise, the emigration of specialists, and managerial weaknesses has made workforce skill-related challenges the most complex obstacle to the sustainable development of Afghanistan's food industry.

Economic and Financial Challenges Affecting the Recruitment Process

An examination of the economic and financial dimensions of recruitment in food-industry companies located in Afghanistan's industrial parks reveals a difficult and complex reality in which macroeconomic fluctuations directly restrict the essential functions of human resource recruitment. Within this environment, financial challenges do not merely refer to a

shortage of funds; they also involve the deterioration of the infrastructure required to identify and attract talent. The first and most tangible aspect of this crisis concerns companies' financial difficulties, which are manifested in the absence of liquidity for improving recruitment processes and prolonged delays in paying the salaries of employees responsible for human resource functions. When a company cannot pay the wages of its recruitment team, the motivation to monitor the labor market and identify talented individuals effectively disappears. Furthermore, the absence of budgets for training employees in appropriate recruitment methods and the lack of financial capacity to hire highly qualified specialists have forced food-industry factories to accept minimum standards. One senior manager explained, "Liquidity is extremely limited in our companies. When we already face difficulties obtaining raw materials, no budget remains for improving recruitment systems or hiring expensive specialists. Sometimes, even current employees' salaries are delayed for several months, which means that we lose our employer reputation and credibility in the labor market and cannot attract new employees." This situation forces companies to struggle merely for survival rather than invest in human capital, reducing recruitment to a superficial and low-quality activity.

In addition, inadequate reward and incentive systems complement these financial crises and transform recruitment into an uninspiring process that lacks creativity. In many of these companies, no rewards are provided for properly conducting recruitment, ensuring the quality of new hires, or introducing innovative talent-identification methods. When recruitment officers or production-unit managers perceive no difference in reward between hiring an underqualified employee and recruiting a highly capable individual, they gradually move toward the simplest and least valuable choices. Similarly, the absence of rewards for regular attendance or process innovation introduces a culture of passivity throughout the organization. One interviewee complained, "In our factory, there is no difference between someone who carefully recruits the best employee and someone who merely fills an empty position. We provide no reward for recruitment quality or innovation, and this has caused everyone to seek the easiest approach rather than the best one." The absence of financial and nonfinancial incentives means that recruitment, rather than functioning as a mechanism for corporate growth, becomes a mechanical and exhausting activity in which employers are dissatisfied with workforce quality and employees have little motivation to pursue excellence. Ultimately, the interaction of limited liquidity, job insecurity, and absent reward systems has created a critical triangle that traps recruitment in Afghanistan's food industry in an economic impasse and prevents the development of a competent and specialized workforce. By comprehensively examining these economic dimensions and considering the realities prevailing in industrial parks, this analysis demonstrates the extent to which financial poverty contributes to skill-related and structural deficiencies in human resource management.

Infrastructural and Technological Challenges in the Recruitment Process

Infrastructural and technological challenges in recruitment within food-industry enterprises located in Afghanistan's industrial parks constitute fundamental barriers to the modernization of human resource management systems. In an era in which digital transformation has redefined the boundaries of talent acquisition, factories located in these areas continue to struggle with the most basic communication and information tools. Inadequate technological infrastructure is primarily manifested in the absence of stable, high-speed internet, effectively eliminating the possibility of using modern platforms and establishing online communication. When communication infrastructure is unstable, practices such as online interviewing and the use of cloud-based systems become unattainable. The lack of sufficient and up-to-date computer equipment in administrative departments, together with the absence of specialized human resource management software,

has confined organizational processes to outdated and traditional tools. One manager explained, “We experience repeated internet disruptions even when attempting to send a simple email to applicants or post a job advertisement. The absence of backup systems and information-security mechanisms means that we are constantly afraid of losing the limited data we possess. Our infrastructure was designed for traditional production, not modern management.” These technical deficiencies impose an additional layer of insecurity on organizations because the absence of information-security systems and backup protocols places all personnel and recruitment records at risk of permanent loss.

Alongside this technological deficiency, weak internal control systems constitute a structural challenge that threatens the integrity and fairness of recruitment. In an environment where recruitment stages are not closely monitored, the likelihood of unprofessional and subjective practices increases significantly. The absence of internal audits in human resource units and the lack of quality-control mechanisms in selection processes mean that applicants’ documents are not properly verified and that mechanisms for preventing violations or examining complaints are virtually nonexistent. Without monitoring, standards become ineffective, and recruitment is determined by relationships and chance rather than scientific criteria. One expert emphasized, “We have no systematic supervision of interviews and selection decisions. The absence of internal auditing means that no one knows whether a recruited individual was actually selected on the basis of competence. The lack of document-control systems and applicant-complaint procedures has facilitated the entry of unqualified individuals.” This absence of control not only reduces workforce quality but also damages public confidence in the company’s employer brand.

Finally, all these challenges are reflected in ineffective time management in recruitment, which transforms the recruitment process into a prolonged, exhausting, and frustrating procedure. Repeated delays in scheduling interviews, the absence of defined response timelines for applicants, and the failure to prioritize résumé reviews mean that many high-quality candidates are recruited by competing organizations or enter other labor markets before the company reaches a decision.

Cultural, Social, and Ethical Challenges Associated With Recruitment and Hiring

An examination of the deeper social and cultural dimensions of recruitment in Afghanistan’s food industry reveals structural tensions that extend beyond technical skills and challenge the organization’s ethical and human identity. Challenges associated with recruiting women represent one of the most visible barriers. Deep-rooted cultural restrictions and negative family attitudes effectively exclude half of the potential workforce. The absence of appropriate and separate physical facilities for women in factories, combined with limited managerial support for establishing safe and respectful workplaces, has made women’s participation in industrial parks extremely difficult. This traditional attitude not only eliminates equal opportunities but also deprives organizations of the precision and discipline that women may contribute to sensitive areas of food production. Social problems affecting recruitment also impose short-term behavioral patterns that prevent the formation of a stable workforce. The predominance of daily-wage work over structured employment, combined with applicants’ social pressures and personal difficulties, causes even the most structured recruitment programs to fail under conditions of social instability. Ultimately, this cultural and ethical impasse is rooted in a weak learning culture, in which recruited employees receive no training to improve their soft skills or ethical conduct and lack motivation to enhance their knowledge. The absence of organizational learning and a culture of study among recruitment teams has meant that recruitment methods have remained unchanged for decades, reproducing the same traditional and unprofessional behavior across successive generations of employees. When interviewers have not learned communication and interpersonal skills, they cannot be expected to adopt fair approaches when confronting social challenges. This dysfunctional cycle, encompassing discrimination,

limited social responsibility, humiliating conduct, and educational stagnation, has transformed recruitment in industrial parks into an environment in which fundamental human values are sacrificed for immediate and subjective needs. This situation makes a fundamental reconsideration of recruitment culture and ethics essential to the survival of Afghanistan's food industry.

Challenges Related to the Localization of the Recruitment Process

In pursuing the sustainable development of the food industry in Afghanistan's industrial parks, inadequate localization of the recruitment process has emerged as one of the most complex cultural and managerial barriers. This misalignment is initially manifested in insufficient cultural localization of recruitment, whereby organizations create a substantial divide between themselves and applicants by neglecting local languages in advertisements and inadequately translating application forms. The conflict between the urban culture represented by factory management and the traditional and rural background of the main labor force results in misinterpretations of ethnic values, leading to limited mutual understanding and reduced motivation to cooperate. When job advertisements are published only in formal language and through channels disconnected from applicants' daily realities, highly capable local workers who may not possess advanced academic literacy but have extensive practical skills are excluded from recruitment. This alienation continues through inadequate instrumental and linguistic localization. The use of complex forms, nonvisual questionnaires, and interviews containing incomprehensible technical terminology creates an impenetrable barrier to applicants' participation. One manager noted during the interviews, "To select a production-line operator, we provide forms that appear to have been designed for a managerial position in the capital. This complicated and unfamiliar language not only intimidates applicants but also conceals their actual abilities beneath a layer of unfamiliar terminology."

From a managerial perspective, these failures are rooted in inadequate incentive systems for human resource managers. When no managerial reward is offered for successful recruitment, no performance evaluation is conducted for recruitment managers, and no explicit criteria are defined for measuring recruitment success, managers naturally adopt stereotypical and less demanding practices rather than attempting to localize and improve recruitment processes. The absence of verbal recognition, simple certificates of appreciation, and opportunities for recruitment personnel to participate in strategic decision-making has transformed deficiencies in nonfinancial incentive systems into a chronic organizational problem. In many of these companies, recruitment employees have no career-development pathway, individual development program, or access to specialized courses and soft-skills training. They feel trapped in a career dead end in which neither promotion opportunities nor space for innovation exists. One human resource officer explained, "Here, we are merely machines for processing recruitment paperwork. No one appreciates us for bringing in the best employees, and we are given no opportunity to learn new methods. When recruitment managers themselves have no motivation to grow and learn, how can they make the recruitment process innovative and locally appropriate for others?" This absence of financial and nonfinancial incentives has caused recruitment teams to lose their motivation to understand the local environment and revise outdated approaches. Consequently, the entire recruitment process remains trapped in a cycle of inefficiency and disconnection from field realities. Overcoming this impasse requires reconsidering incentive systems and localizing organizational structures according to local values. This is not merely an optional strategy but an essential requirement for the survival of the industry.

Political Challenges and Human Resource Risks in Recruitment and Promotion

Within the anatomy of recruitment challenges in Afghanistan's food industry, political challenges and human resource risks constitute critical variables that transform recruitment from a purely administrative activity into a complex equation of organizational survival. In an environment characterized by extremely limited political and social stability, inadequate security screening has become a major vulnerability for companies located in industrial parks. The absence of systematic mechanisms for investigating applicants' local security backgrounds and the recruitment of employees without obtaining reliable legal or customary guarantees facilitate the entry of unqualified individuals, and potentially infiltrators, into the most sensitive sections of food-production lines. In the absence of a centralized information-verification system, managers are compelled to rely on the rapid completion of employment forms, despite the lack of accurate verification of submitted documents or applicants' criminal histories. This information gap considerably increases the risk of recruiting infiltrators who may seek to engage in industrial espionage, sabotage food-product quality, or steal intellectual and physical assets. A direct consequence is the emergence of distrust between established and newly recruited employees, which severely damages teamwork. One senior manager expressed this concern as follows: "We are effectively walking in darkness. When no system exists for checking an individual's background and we recruit employees hastily out of necessity, we constantly anticipate a security disaster or sabotage on the production line. The absence of reliable guarantees means that no one is held accountable for applicants' high-risk behavior."

Political and social pressures on recruitment represent powerful external forces that undermine managerial autonomy. Social threats associated with recruiting women and minority-group members, originating from traditional and extremist segments of society, have effectively suspended substantial portions of the recruitment process. Human resource managers frequently experience pressure from influential local individuals or political power groups to recruit their preferred candidates without considering technical qualifications. Such political pressure not only eliminates meritocracy but also turns organizations into employment shelters for unqualified individuals whose recruitment is supported solely by local power structures. One recruitment manager described these pressures as follows: "We sometimes receive letters from influential local figures recommending that a particular individual be recruited. Rejecting these requests means confronting threats against the factory. We are caught between two opposing pressures: On the one hand, we require specialized expertise; on the other hand, we must manage local political and security pressures so the factory can continue operating." The intersection of security risks, social pressures, and structural weaknesses has transformed recruitment in Afghanistan's food industry into a managerial minefield in which physical security and organizational survival take precedence over workforce quality and specialization. Without creating stable security protections and precise monitoring mechanisms, any effort to scientifically improve recruitment in these areas will remain vulnerable to failure under the influence of these external variables.

Challenges in Employee Attraction and Selection Before Hiring

An examination of deficiencies in the dissemination of recruitment information clearly reveals the absence of an effective communication strategy. Job advertisements are distributed through highly limited and inefficient channels, and the absence of notice boards throughout industrial parks effectively prevents local job seekers from accessing employment opportunities. Although social media networks play a critical role in workforce recruitment, these companies undertake virtually no digital dissemination and have no collaboration with local media. Recruitment brochures that could present the organizational culture do not exist, and even the absence of a dedicated human resource telephone number has turned communication with applicants into a major problem. As stated in the document titled *All Actual Interviews.docx*, many applicants do not

even know which companies are operating in the industrial park or which positions are available. This communication deficiency is combined with inadequate internal referral networks. Employee referral systems, which can be among the most cost-effective and reliable recruitment methods, have been entirely neglected. No incentives are provided for employee referrals, management does not trust the process, and referral culture is absent. Companies do not even provide a simple internal referral form through which existing employees could connect qualified individuals with the organization.

The divide between industry and academia reaches its greatest extent through inadequate relationships with universities. No memoranda of understanding exist with faculties specializing in food science and technology, and no joint internship programs are available. Companies do not participate in career fairs, and communication with faculty members who could identify outstanding graduates has effectively been severed. This disconnection is repeated in limited relationships with employment agencies. The absence of formal cooperation and distrust of these institutions prevents companies from using their capacity to assess and recruit specialists. Consequently, these deficiencies result in weak proactive recruitment. No active labor-market searches are conducted, no recruitment strategy is defined, and employer branding is so weak that companies consistently lose the competition for scarce talent.

Companies also struggle with applicants' behavioral problems. A lack of commitment to recruitment regulations, sudden withdrawal from recruitment procedures, and applicants' unreasonable demands indicate the absence of a reciprocal ethical culture. This inefficient cycle is completed by deficiencies in human resource data analytics. No reporting systems, human resource dashboards, or analyses of employee turnover or quality of hire exist, and management makes decisions solely on the basis of incomplete verbal information. Finally, companies experience weaknesses in employee exit processes. The absence of exit interviews and the failure to document the reasons for employee departure prevent organizations from learning from previous mistakes or developing retention programs for key employees. In other words, the absence of follow-up with former employees and the failure to analyze the causes of turnover trap these organizations in a permanent cycle of recruiting and losing low-quality employees, preventing recruitment from becoming scientific and strategic. This chain of weaknesses depicts an entirely traditional, nontransparent, and vulnerable process that seriously threatens the survival of the food industry in Afghanistan's industrial parks.

Challenges Related to Standards, Regulations, and Compliance During Recruitment

In many small and medium-sized food-industry companies, recruitment continues to be based on personal judgment, experience, and immediate circumstances rather than on predefined industry standards. Consequently, companies lack explicit criteria, consistent indicators, and reliable evaluation frameworks for individual positions. Under these conditions, the recruitment of production-line operators, quality-control employees, and health and sanitation personnel is conducted through the same general and ambiguous procedures, although each position requires different criteria. The document titled *All Actual Interviews.docx* emphasizes the need to publish "precise and transparent job announcements" and to conduct a "comprehensive assessment" through written examinations and specialized interviews. The same document indicates that the absence of standards is a principal problem and that organizations must define the type of employee required for each position. Under current conditions, however, standards for recruiting operators remain unspecified. The required literacy level, practical skills, degree of precision and speed, and expected capacity to operate machinery have not been clearly defined. The same problem applies to quality-control applicants. Organizations must determine the required level of familiarity with quality-control principles, food hygiene, data recording, sampling, and report writing. When such standards

do not exist, decision-makers rely exclusively on personal judgment, increasing the likelihood that unsuitable individuals will enter the organization.

Recruitment risk does not refer exclusively to selecting an unsuitable individual. It also includes temporal, operational, behavioral, reputational, and organizational risks. The absence of backup applicants means that when an individual withdraws during the final recruitment stage or is found to lack the necessary qualifications, the company has no reserve option and the recruitment process is interrupted. This problem is also reflected in the documents, which state that inadequate planning means companies “cannot identify appropriate employees when they are urgently needed and are therefore compelled to recruit inexperienced or unsuitable individuals.” This statement clearly demonstrates how recruitment risk can develop into a workforce-shortage crisis during sensitive periods. The absence of flexibility in organizational recruitment policies represents another aspect of this problem. Recruitment policies should provide different responses for different circumstances, including technical positions, supervisory positions, seasonal employees, inexperienced applicants, and experienced workers. However, when all applicants are processed through one rigid and uniform procedure, the organization cannot adapt to diverse labor-market realities. The documents also refer to “the need to standardize recruitment processes” and “the use of online platforms,” both of which indicate the necessity of modernization.

Overall, these four categories are interconnected: the absence of professional standards, limited legal compliance, inadequate risk-management capabilities, and resistance to change. This combination has transformed recruitment in Afghanistan’s small and medium-sized food-industry enterprises from a strategic process into an exhausting and costly activity.

Communication and Employer-Branding Challenges

Among the fundamental human resource management challenges in the food industry located in industrial parks, weak employer branding constitutes one of the most significant barriers to attracting highly talented employees, particularly younger members of Generation Z. Because these companies lack a positive and professional workplace image, they have reached an impasse in the competitive labor market. No organized recruitment advertising is undertaken, and organizations lack competitive advantages capable of persuading specialists to select them as employers. This disconnection from the psychological and social needs of younger generations has caused factory environments to be perceived as monotonous, rigid, and lacking career-development prospects. When young applicants seeking innovative opportunities and dynamic environments encounter closed organizational structures, absent incentive systems, and unattractive employer branding, they lose their motivation to join the company. This organizational identity crisis is not limited to external perceptions but is also rooted in limited interorganizational communication. Companies operating in the same industry undertake no strategic cooperation to share recruitment experiences or create common databases for identifying specialists. This isolated approach deprives companies of opportunities to exchange knowledge concerning skilled employees and regional workforce capacity. Each factory attempts to address its recruitment problems independently, substantially increasing recruitment overhead costs.

At the internal-management level, these difficulties are manifested in inadequate employee relationship management. The absence of a transparent communication system between management and employees has almost entirely eliminated mutual trust. When employees work in an environment in which there is no strong employer brand with which they can identify, no interorganizational network to support them, and no transparent and humane communication with

management, recruitment inevitably becomes a dysfunctional and inconclusive cycle of employee entry and departure rather than an investment in human capital. This cycle ultimately weakens food-production operations in industrial parks and creates serious challenges for organizational and operational sustainability.

Legitimacy and Trust Challenges During Recruitment

Within small and medium-sized food-industry enterprises located in industrial parks, legitimacy and trust challenges during recruitment have become major barriers that weaken organizations internally and externally. The first and potentially most damaging manifestation of this crisis is public distrust of recruitment, which is rooted in widespread rumors and social pessimism. In many cases, job applicants enter the recruitment process with the assumption that it is affected by favoritism and ethnic discrimination. When local communities circulate rumors that “a particular ethnic group is prioritized” or that “recruitment is conducted exclusively through personal connections,” confidence in the fairness of the process disappears. Applicants who are rejected accuse the system of injustice rather than acknowledging limitations in their qualifications, and these objections spread rapidly through local social networks and factory communities. Even more damaging are the negative accounts of former employees communicated to new applicants. When individuals who have left the organization describe “deceptive promises” or “discriminatory treatment,” the organization’s employer brand is effectively destroyed in the public mind. Distrust of examination and interview results has reached a point at which applicants may attribute rejection to structural corruption even when the process is fair. This indicates that organizations have become immersed in a crisis of legitimacy.

Finally, discrimination and social tension affecting recruitment legitimacy are particularly evident in relation to women’s participation in the workplace. Traditional resistance and family pressures based on the belief that women’s employment conflicts with cultural values create a negative protective barrier. In many factories, cultural tensions surrounding women’s presence and discriminatory or informal treatment have caused families to become unwilling to allow their daughters to work. Even within organizations, implicit discrimination, such as cultural distancing from female employees or unprofessional treatment, undermines the legitimacy of women’s workplace participation. When organizations cannot create a safe and equitable environment in which meritocracy replaces discrimination, they effectively lose half of the region’s workforce potential. These challenges demonstrate that recruitment in Afghanistan’s industrial parks is not merely a technical human resource issue but a complex problem involving trust, culture, and social legitimacy. Without rebuilding ethical structures and ensuring complete transparency, no technical or managerial instrument can resolve the problem.

Challenges Associated With Recruiting Applicants With Low Levels of Literacy

In industrial environments requiring precision in production operations and compliance with health standards, low levels of basic literacy among job applicants have become one of the most significant operational challenges. Many applicants approaching companies in industrial parks encounter serious difficulties during the initial recruitment stages, including the completion of simple employment forms. The inability to complete administrative documents, which may even result in major errors in identity information or employment-history records, makes the recruitment process slow and exhausting from the outset. This is not merely an administrative problem but also reflects an inability to understand formal texts. Applicants may be unable to properly interpret even the basic provisions of an employment contract or a simple notice. Because these applicants are unfamiliar with interview procedures, they may experience severe anxiety when responding to standardized questions and become unable to articulate their actual competencies. Consequently, potentially capable but low-literate

individuals may be unfairly excluded from recruitment. The documents repeatedly indicate that traditional recruitment procedures provide no alternative arrangements for individuals with limited reading and writing skills, resulting in the loss of valuable human resources within the region. More critically, the substantial technological skills gap has become increasingly difficult to overcome as food-industry factories move toward automation. Because applicants lack an adequate educational foundation, exposure to new factory technologies may create fear and resistance. They are unable to interact technically with digital machinery and may struggle to maintain even relatively simple production equipment because such machinery appears unfamiliar and excessively complex. Furthermore, the training provided by factories does not correspond to applicants' foundational skill levels and substantially exceeds their learning capacity. This misalignment renders companies' training efforts ineffective. In other words, organizations seeking to increase productivity and reduce production errors are employing individuals who struggle to understand the technical foundations of production. This technological divide not only reduces productivity but also undermines applicants' motivation to learn because they perceive the gap between their existing knowledge and factory requirements as too extensive to overcome. Consequently, these recruitment challenges trap organizations in a cycle of "recruiting unprepared workers, incurring high training costs, producing low-quality outputs, and experiencing employee turnover." Breaking this cycle requires the reconsideration of localized training models and the simplification of factories' technical and recruitment processes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify and explain the challenges affecting the employee recruitment process in small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the food industry and located in Afghanistan's industrial parks. The findings revealed a complex and multidimensional structure consisting of 15 major components and 78 categories. These components included institutional and governance challenges, structural and systemic weaknesses, managerial and leadership deficiencies, workforce skill gaps, economic and financial constraints, technological and infrastructural limitations, cultural and ethical barriers, inadequate localization, political and human resource risks, weaknesses in pre-employment attraction and selection, deficiencies in standards and legal compliance, communication and employer-branding problems, legitimacy and trust challenges, and difficulties associated with recruiting applicants with low levels of literacy. Taken together, the results indicate that recruitment in these enterprises is not a discrete administrative function but a systemic organizational process influenced by the interaction of internal management practices, labor-market conditions, institutional arrangements, technological capacity, cultural norms, and broader political and economic circumstances. This interpretation is consistent with the strategic human resource management perspective, which considers recruitment and selection to be organizational capabilities that influence employee quality, operational performance, and long-term competitiveness [1, 3].

One of the most prominent findings concerned institutional, governance, and macro-environmental challenges. Participants emphasized weak coordination among governmental and industrial institutions, regulatory instability, limited administrative transparency, insufficient accountability, and inadequate institutional capacity for human resource management. These conditions created uncertainty for employers and encouraged informal, relationship-based recruitment practices. This result is compatible with the argument that recruitment systems are unlikely to achieve meritocracy unless they are supported by transparent governance, objective criteria, institutional accountability, and consistent administrative procedures [11]. In the absence of such conditions, recruitment decisions may become vulnerable to favoritism, political

influence, and nonprofessional judgment. The finding also supports studies showing that specialized recruitment requires clear institutional frameworks and explicit occupational criteria rather than general and ambiguous procedures [4]. In Afghanistan's industrial parks, the weakness of external labor institutions appears to be reproduced within individual enterprises, thereby preventing the development of formal recruitment standards and reducing confidence in the fairness of employment decisions.

The findings further showed that structural and systemic weaknesses within enterprises constituted a central barrier to recruitment effectiveness. Many of the studied companies lacked an independent human resource department, formal job descriptions, workforce planning systems, structured interviews, performance appraisal mechanisms, employee-retention programs, and digital applicant databases. Recruitment was therefore frequently conducted by factory owners, production managers, or administrative employees using personal judgment and immediate operational needs. Similar organizational case studies have demonstrated that recruitment quality declines when job analysis, selection criteria, documentation, and assessment procedures are not formally established [2]. Strategic recruitment research also emphasizes that recruitment must begin with workforce planning and accurate identification of organizational needs rather than merely responding to vacant positions after operational problems have emerged [3]. The absence of such systems in the studied enterprises transforms recruitment into a reactive and crisis-driven activity. This is especially problematic for small and medium-sized enterprises because each inappropriate appointment can impose substantial training, supervision, production, and turnover costs.

Managerial and leadership challenges were also strongly represented in the findings. Participants described weak communication among production, finance, and human resource functions, limited meritocracy, subjective managerial decisions, and inadequate strategic understanding of human resource management. These findings suggest that recruitment problems originate not only from the absence of technical tools but also from the attitudes and decision-making patterns of senior managers. When managers view recruitment as an operational necessity rather than a strategic investment, long-term workforce planning, competency management, and talent development receive limited attention. This interpretation is consistent with evidence indicating that strategic recruitment and selection must be aligned with organizational objectives and supported by senior-management commitment [1]. It also corresponds with the dynamic-capabilities perspective, which argues that organizations must continuously reconfigure managerial routines and integrate human expertise with new technologies to create value [22]. Without leadership support, neither standardized recruitment systems nor technological innovations can be implemented effectively.

Another major finding involved the shortage of skilled workers and the mismatch between available labor and the technical requirements of the food industry. Participants reported difficulties recruiting machine operators, maintenance technicians, quality-control specialists, laboratory personnel, and employees familiar with food-hygiene standards. They also highlighted technical skills gaps, limited food-industry knowledge, dependence on foreign specialists, brain drain, and the progressive depletion of the local talent pool. This result is consistent with research showing that contemporary employers increasingly require hybrid competencies that combine technical proficiency, digital literacy, problem-solving, communication, adaptability, and teamwork [7]. It also aligns with comparative evidence indicating that effective recruitment depends on coordination between education, professional training, and labor-market requirements [8]. The findings imply that the challenge in Afghanistan is not simply unemployment or a shortage of applicants; rather, it is a shortage of applicants

whose competencies correspond to industrial requirements. The gap between formal education, vocational training, and workplace needs therefore appears to be a fundamental cause of recruitment failure.

The identified skill-related challenges were closely associated with weak intersectoral collaboration. Participants reported limited relationships with universities, vocational institutions, employment agencies, and other companies operating in the same industry. Consequently, firms had no stable access to graduates, trainees, or shared pools of skilled labor. This finding is supported by evidence that collaboration among educational institutions, employers, governmental agencies, and professional organizations can strengthen workforce education, recruitment, and retention [14]. In the present context, the absence of such collaboration leaves each enterprise to search independently within a fragmented labor market. Establishing partnerships with universities and technical institutes could help companies define competency standards, develop internship programs, and communicate emerging occupational requirements. Without these relationships, educational institutions may continue to produce graduates whose knowledge does not meet industry needs, while employers remain unable to identify or develop potential talent.

Economic and financial challenges represented another significant theme. The participants referred to liquidity shortages, delayed salary payments, weak job security, inadequate recruitment budgets, and the absence of effective financial and nonfinancial reward systems. These factors reduced the ability of enterprises to attract skilled employees and weakened the motivation of managers responsible for recruitment. The findings reinforce the view that recruitment and retention are interdependent. Organizations may successfully identify qualified employees, but they are unlikely to recruit or retain them when compensation is unreliable, employment conditions are insecure, and opportunities for recognition or development are limited. Research on workforce recruitment and retention has shown that organizational support, working conditions, career development, and professional recognition substantially influence employees' decisions to remain in or leave organizations [12, 13]. Similar reviews in healthcare indicate that recruitment difficulties frequently coexist with retention problems, workforce burnout, inadequate incentives, and weak development systems [6]. The current findings therefore suggest that improving recruitment without addressing compensation, job security, and retention would produce only temporary benefits.

Technological and infrastructural deficiencies also emerged as major challenges. Participants reported unstable internet access, insufficient computer equipment, reliance on paper-based records, the absence of applicant-tracking systems, weak information security, and limited digital communication with candidates. These findings are notable because contemporary recruitment increasingly relies on online platforms, electronic databases, automated screening, virtual interviews, and data analytics. Previous research has shown that artificial intelligence and digital technologies can increase the speed, reach, and consistency of recruitment by supporting candidate sourcing, résumé screening, classification, and decision-making [16, 20]. AI has also been associated with improvements in recruitment efficiency and organizational performance when it is integrated with strategic human resource practices [17, 19]. However, the findings of the present study demonstrate that advanced technological solutions cannot be introduced successfully without basic infrastructure, data quality, digital literacy, and managerial readiness. The adoption of AI in recruitment depends on perceived usefulness, ease of use, facilitating conditions, and organizational support [21]. Therefore, the immediate need of these enterprises may not be sophisticated algorithmic systems but basic digitalization, including electronic applications, secure résumé databases, standardized forms, and reliable communication systems.

The findings also identified serious cultural, social, and ethical challenges, including restrictions on women's employment, ethnic and social discrimination, relationship-based recruitment, disrespectful treatment of applicants, weak corporate social responsibility, and limited organizational learning. These findings indicate that recruitment practices reflect the broader social environment in which enterprises operate. The exclusion of women and minority groups narrows the available talent pool and undermines both fairness and organizational legitimacy. Research on recruitment methodologies has demonstrated that the methods used to communicate opportunities and engage candidates can either improve or restrict the participation of underrepresented populations [9]. In addition, inclusive interview practices and interviewer training can reduce bias and enable applicants from diverse backgrounds to present their capabilities more effectively [10]. In the studied enterprises, however, weak procedural safeguards and the predominance of informal relationships appear to intensify rather than reduce social inequalities. The resulting perception of discrimination damages trust among applicants and discourages qualified individuals from participating in recruitment processes.

Localization challenges were another important result. Participants explained that recruitment forms, interview terminology, advertisements, and assessment tools were frequently inconsistent with local languages, literacy levels, cultural norms, and applicants' practical experiences. As a result, some individuals with useful experiential skills were excluded because they could not understand complex forms or express their competencies through formal interviews. This finding illustrates the necessity of adapting recruitment procedures to the characteristics of the target labor market. Recruitment methods influence not only the number of applicants but also the types of individuals who can meaningfully participate in selection processes [9]. Standardization should therefore not be interpreted as the rigid use of identical procedures for all candidates. Rather, it should involve the consistent assessment of relevant competencies through accessible and context-appropriate methods. For low-literacy applicants, practical demonstrations, visual instructions, oral assessments, and supervised work samples may provide more valid evidence of competence than complex written forms.

Political pressure, security risks, and inadequate employee screening were also identified as distinctive features of the recruitment context. Participants described pressure from influential individuals, difficulties verifying applicants' backgrounds and documents, safety concerns, and the risk of recruiting individuals through local power relationships rather than professional criteria. These findings deepen the understanding of recruitment in fragile institutional environments. Although international recruitment literature commonly focuses on efficiency, technology, and organizational attractiveness, the present findings show that physical security, political influence, and organizational survival may take precedence over standard human resource considerations. The meritocratic governance principles identified in previous research are particularly important under these conditions because transparent criteria, documented decisions, and multiple evaluators can reduce the influence of external pressure [11]. Nevertheless, enterprise-level procedures alone may be insufficient unless reliable institutional mechanisms for credential verification, labor regulation, and security screening are also established.

Weaknesses in pre-employment attraction and selection included inadequate job advertising, limited use of social media, weak internal referral systems, poor relationships with employment agencies, ineffective résumé management, unstructured interviews, limited screening, and the absence of human resource analytics. These results correspond with research demonstrating that recruitment channels and assessment methodologies shape the quality and diversity of the candidate pool [9]. They also support evidence that intelligent digital systems can improve candidate classification and assist recruitment decisions when they are based on valid data and appropriate criteria [20]. However, the present study also

revealed that technology cannot correct poorly defined jobs or subjective decision-making. Before adopting automated tools, companies must clarify job requirements, standardize interview questions, define scoring criteria, and document recruitment outcomes. Otherwise, digital systems may merely automate existing inconsistencies.

Communication and employer-branding weaknesses further reduced the attractiveness of these enterprises. Participants indicated that companies lacked a positive employment image, communicated poorly with candidates, provided little information about career development, and failed to establish trust with current and prospective employees. Recent research demonstrates that recruitment technologies, data practices, and candidate experiences influence organizational attractiveness [15]. Applicants evaluate organizations not only according to salary but also according to fairness, responsiveness, respect, developmental opportunities, and technological professionalism. AI-supported recruitment may improve organizational attractiveness when applicants perceive it as transparent and useful, but it may have the opposite effect when it appears intrusive or unfair [15, 18]. For the enterprises examined in this study, employer branding should therefore begin with basic procedural reliability: publishing accurate announcements, responding to applicants, explaining decisions, treating candidates respectfully, and fulfilling employment promises.

The findings concerning legitimacy and public trust integrate many of the preceding challenges. Participants reported widespread perceptions of favoritism, ethnic discrimination, broken promises, and unreliable recruitment outcomes. Legitimacy is difficult to establish when applicants cannot understand how decisions are made or when formal criteria are absent. Meritocratic recruitment based on good governance requires transparency, accountability, equal opportunity, and verifiable assessment [11]. In addition, the broader literature on inclusive recruitment suggests that organizations must actively address bias rather than assume that apparently neutral procedures are necessarily fair [10]. The present findings demonstrate that trust is not produced through public statements alone; it develops when recruitment procedures are documented, consistently implemented, open to review, and aligned with ethical principles.

Overall, the results reveal that recruitment challenges in Afghanistan's small and medium-sized food-industry enterprises form an interconnected system. Institutional weakness encourages informality; informality reduces transparency and meritocracy; weak management prevents workforce planning; limited finance restricts technological investment and compensation; skill shortages increase dependence on unsuitable applicants; and poor treatment of candidates damages employer branding and public trust. Consequently, isolated interventions are unlikely to be effective. Introducing recruitment software without improving infrastructure, competency standards, and management practices would have limited value. Similarly, publishing more vacancies without addressing job security, discrimination, and organizational reputation would not necessarily attract skilled candidates. Effective reform requires an integrated model that combines governance, professional human resource structures, workforce development, appropriate technology, ethical recruitment, local adaptation, and retention-oriented employment practices.

This study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research adopted a qualitative design and relied on the experiences and perceptions of experts and senior human resource managers; therefore, the results reflect managerial interpretations and may not fully represent the experiences of job applicants, current employees, former employees, women seeking industrial employment, or governmental officials. Second, the study focused on small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the food industry within Afghanistan's industrial parks, which limits the direct transferability of the findings to large enterprises, public organizations, service industries, or companies operating

outside industrial zones. Third, purposive and snowball sampling may have increased the likelihood that participants belonged to related professional networks and shared similar viewpoints. Finally, the sensitivity of political influence, security screening, ethnic discrimination, and informal recruitment may have caused some participants to moderate their responses despite the confidentiality procedures adopted by the researchers.

Future studies should examine the recruitment process from the perspectives of job applicants, newly recruited employees, former employees, women, low-literacy workers, vocational educators, and labor-market institutions to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Quantitative research could be conducted to assess the prevalence and relative importance of the 15 identified components and to test their relationships with recruitment effectiveness, quality of hire, employee turnover, organizational performance, and employer attractiveness. Comparative studies could also examine differences across industries, provinces, company sizes, and industrial parks. Future researchers may develop and validate a context-sensitive recruitment assessment instrument based on the categories identified in this study. Intervention studies should additionally evaluate the effectiveness of structured interviews, localized application forms, practical skills tests, digital applicant databases, university–industry partnerships, and merit-based recruitment protocols.

Managers and policymakers should treat recruitment as an integrated strategic process rather than an informal response to immediate workforce shortages. Small and medium-sized food-industry enterprises should establish at least a basic human resource function, develop clear job descriptions and competency profiles, use structured interviews and practical assessments, and document all selection decisions. Recruitment materials should be available in locally understandable languages and should be adapted to applicants with limited literacy through oral explanations, visual forms, and work-sample tests. Companies should create secure digital databases for applicant records, strengthen communication with universities and vocational institutes, develop internship and apprenticeship programs, and establish transparent internal referral systems. Salary reliability, job security, recognition, respectful treatment, and career-development opportunities should be improved to strengthen both recruitment and retention. At the institutional level, labor authorities, chambers of industry, educational institutions, and industrial-park administrations should cooperate to develop occupational standards, shared talent databases, credential-verification systems, and transparent mechanisms for monitoring recruitment fairness.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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