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Designing a Compensation System Model with a Social Justice Approach in the National Iranian Oil Company

ABSTRACT

Social justice encompasses a set of actions and policies in various domains aimed at creating a fairer and more equitable society. The purpose of this study was to design a compensation system model with a social justice approach in the National Iranian Oil Company. This research was applied in nature and employed a mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Considering the research objective, the layered research model of Saunders et al. (2016) was used to explain the layers of research from philosophy to technique. An inductive approach was adopted, and based on inductive reasoning from the insights obtained, the relevant model was developed. In this process, the use of informed experts as well as adherence to scientific methodology was also applied. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and content analysis of texts. In addition to face validity, convergent validity and construct validity were employed, the results of which confirmed the validity. The target statistical population included 20 experts, professors, specialists, and senior managers of the National Iranian Oil Company. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for the interview averages with SPSS software, and confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using LISREL software. The findings led to the design of a model in which social justice is grounded on certain pillars that contribute to the compliance and reinforcement of the compensation system in organizations. These pillars included fair laws, just and virtuous implementers, supervision, and public awareness.

Keywords: Social justice, layered model, inductive approach, fair laws, just implementers

Introduction

The concept of compensation systems has long been a central theme in human resource management, labor economics, and organizational behavior. Compensation not only provides employees with financial rewards for their contributions but also represents a key element of organizational justice and equity. In particular, the design of a compensation system with an emphasis on social justice has been identified as a strategic lever for enhancing employee motivation, retention, and organizational performance [1, 2]. Organizations today operate in increasingly complex environments, facing pressures to balance competitiveness, fairness, and sustainability in their compensation strategies. This growing complexity highlights the need for models of compensation systems that are not only economically efficient but also socially just and aligned with both institutional expectations and employee values [3].

Compensation systems serve multiple purposes, including attracting, motivating, and retaining skilled employees, while simultaneously ensuring fairness and adherence to organizational values [4]. Strategic compensation management requires the integration of equity considerations with broader human resource policies. As such, recent research has underscored the importance of designing compensation systems that incorporate dimensions of fairness, justice, and sustainability [5]. This approach is particularly vital in contexts where employees' perceptions of justice strongly influence their organizational commitment, engagement, and overall job satisfaction. Theoretical perspectives on distributive and procedural justice highlight how employees evaluate both the outcomes they receive and the processes by which those outcomes are determined [6]. Therefore, aligning compensation systems with principles of justice can contribute to employee well-being, organizational effectiveness, and social harmony.

The literature has increasingly emphasized the relationship between compensation and employee retention. For instance, turnover remains one of the most pressing challenges for organizations globally, with compensation emerging as a critical predictor of employees' decisions to remain or leave [7]. Beyond mere financial remuneration, comprehensive compensation packages that include benefits, career development opportunities, and non-monetary rewards are essential for maintaining employee loyalty [4]. Similarly, retention strategies grounded in justice-oriented compensation can enhance both employee satisfaction and organizational stability [8]. Evidence from diverse organizational settings shows that justice-based compensation contributes to lowering voluntary turnover rates, thus saving significant replacement costs and protecting organizational knowledge [9].

Compensation systems also function as instruments for human resource development and succession planning. By linking compensation with strategic goals, organizations can align employee behavior with long-term objectives and ensure continuity of leadership [10]. Recent models in strategic human resource management propose integrating worthiness and justice considerations into succession planning to secure organizational sustainability and fairness [11]. This perspective reflects a paradigm shift in human resource management where compensation is no longer considered solely a cost factor but a strategic investment in talent, motivation, and justice [12].

Research in different contexts further demonstrates the diversity of approaches to compensation. In municipal settings, for example, compensation system models have been designed to address both managerial efficiency and employees' expectations of fairness [13]. Similarly, in utility companies, strategic compensation models have been implemented to motivate employees and align performance with organizational objectives [14]. These models provide evidence that compensation design is not merely an administrative task but a complex managerial responsibility requiring alignment with organizational strategy and social justice considerations. Furthermore, studies in emerging industries, such as electronics and intelligent knowledge processing, show how fair and attractive compensation systems play a critical role in retaining highly specialized professionals [12].

From a broader economic and sociological perspective, compensation systems are also closely tied to issues of inequality and labor market mismatches. Research in the Indian labor market illustrates how informal employment and mismatches between education and occupation directly affect wages, raising questions about fairness and efficiency in compensation [15]. Such findings highlight the importance of designing compensation systems that address systemic inequalities, thereby reinforcing the principle of social justice in labor relations. In addition, Islamic perspectives on wage determination provide normative frameworks that emphasize fairness, equity, and alignment with ethical values, suggesting that compensation

should not merely be guided by market forces but also by moral and religious principles [6]. These perspectives underscore the multidimensional nature of compensation, encompassing economic, ethical, and social dimensions.

The corporate governance literature also provides valuable insights into the role of compensation in organizational control and accountability. Studies in European firms reveal how CEO compensation is influenced by family control and institutional investors, indicating that compensation design is not only a managerial decision but also a governance mechanism [16]. Similarly, research in the hospitality sector shows that risk considerations significantly shape CEO compensation contracts, highlighting the role of contextual factors in determining compensation structures [17]. In bankruptcy settings, replacing retention plans with incentive-based plans has been found to improve organizational outcomes, emphasizing the need for adaptive compensation strategies that respond to organizational crises [18]. These findings illustrate how compensation policies serve as tools for organizational survival, adaptability, and justice, particularly in times of uncertainty.

The intersection of compensation and justice is especially critical in public and nonprofit organizations. Evidence from the public sector demonstrates that human resource management practices, including compensation, significantly affect employee performance [19]. Ensuring justice in these systems is vital to maintaining public trust and organizational legitimacy. Moreover, the semantics of justice in the social realm suggest that compensation systems are embedded within broader cultural and societal frameworks [2]. As such, designing a compensation system requires careful consideration of both organizational and societal expectations, making justice a non-negotiable principle.

Another important consideration is the role of compensation systems in supporting elite and veteran groups. Studies in sports management propose models for designing compensation systems that honor veterans and elite professionals, reflecting both recognition and justice [11]. These models emphasize that compensation systems must go beyond standard financial rewards to include symbolic and moral dimensions that affirm employees' contributions. Similarly, strategies for ensuring justice, as outlined in earlier works, stress that compensation systems are integral to maintaining fairness and balance within society [1]. Thus, the integration of justice principles into compensation models reflects not only organizational necessity but also societal responsibility.

Overall, the literature points to a consensus that compensation systems, when designed strategically and grounded in justice, serve as vital instruments for enhancing organizational performance, employee satisfaction, and social equity. Whether in corporate, public, or nonprofit contexts, compensation systems shape employee perceptions of fairness and directly influence retention, commitment, and productivity [7-9]. As organizations face unprecedented challenges, including economic fluctuations, labor market inequalities, and demands for social justice, the design of compensation systems that balance efficiency with equity becomes increasingly important [13, 15, 18]. This research, therefore, builds on the rich body of existing literature to design a compensation system model that integrates the principle of social justice, aiming to provide both theoretical contributions and practical solutions for organizations operating in complex and dynamic environments.

Methods and Materials

This study, in terms of purpose, is applied research. Based on the nature of data collection, it is survey-oriented, using interviews with experts and the grounded theory method. Therefore, this research is classified as applied research, employing mixed methods, both quantitative and qualitative.

Given that the present study seeks to propose a model for a compensation system with a social justice approach, the layered research model of Saunders et al. (2016) was employed to explain the research layers from philosophy to technique. The advantage of using this model was providing a coherent and continuous understanding of the research process.

An inductive approach was applied, aiming to investigate the conceptual patterns of a compensation system with a social justice approach as conceived by experts, specialists, and decision-makers. Subsequently, based on inductive reasoning from the gathered insights, the model was developed. In this process, the use of knowledgeable informants and adherence to scientific methodology were also emphasized.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and content analysis of texts. In addition to face validity, convergent validity and construct validity were used, the results of which confirmed the validity of the instrument. The target statistical population included experts, professors, specialists, and senior managers of the National Iranian Oil Company, from which 20 participants were selected using purposive judgmental sampling. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to the interview data using SPSS software, and confirmatory factor analysis was conducted with LISREL software.

Findings and Results

Based on Morgan's table, a sample size of 220 individuals was selected. Questionnaires were either distributed in person or mailed. Ultimately, 182 complete and valid questionnaires were returned and used for data analysis. Descriptive statistical indicators were employed to analyze the demographic characteristics of respondents. The frequency distribution of respondents was examined based on gender, age, educational level, and work experience.

Accordingly, 92.3% of respondents were male and 7.7% were female. In terms of age, 1.1% were under 30 years old, 19.8% were between 30 and 40 years, 40.7% were between 40 and 50 years, and 38.5% were over 50 years old. Regarding educational level, 2.2% had an associate degree or lower, 47.8% had a bachelor's degree, 43.4% had a master's degree, and 6.6% held doctoral degrees. Concerning work experience, 2.2% had less than 5 years, 4.4% had between 5 and 10 years, 17% had between 11 and 15 years, 26.9% had between 16 and 20 years, and 49.5% had more than 20 years of service.

The research model was tested using the partial least squares (PLS) technique. In general, structural equation modeling (SEM) consists of two parts: the measurement model and the structural model, with variables categorized into latent and observed variables.

1. The measurement model (confirmatory factor analysis) in SEM illustrates the relationships between latent variables and observed variables.
2. The structural model (path analysis) in SEM examines the relationships among latent variables.

To evaluate the quality or validity of the model, two indices were used: the communality validity index and the redundancy validity index. The communality index assesses the quality of the measurement model for each block. The redundancy index, also known as Q^2 (Stone & Geisser index), with positive values, indicates the appropriate and acceptable quality of both the measurement and structural models.

The results of the measurement models and confirmatory factor analysis for this variable, using path analysis and structural equation modeling with LISREL software, are presented below. The estimation results (shown below the figure) indicated that the model was appropriate. Other model fit indices are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Fit Indices of the First Outcome Model

Results	Desired Value	Persian Equivalent	Fit Index
0.98	0.90	Normed Fit Index	NFI
0.98	0.90	Non-Normed Fit Index	NNFI
0.99	0.90	Comparative Fit Index	CFI
0.92	0.90	Goodness of Fit Index	GFI
0.91	0.90	Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index	AGFI
1.50	<3	Chi-square/df	χ^2/df

As can be observed, the model indices indicate acceptable model fit. The chi-square (χ^2) value is relatively low and acceptable (when the χ^2/df ratio is less than 3, the chi-square value is considered appropriate, and the model has good fit. The lower the χ^2 ratio, the better the model fit. In this model, the ratio is approximately 1.50). Additionally, the RMSEA value (0.070) and the indices GFI (0.92), AGFI (0.91), NFI (0.98), NNFI (0.98), and CFI (0.99) all indicate that the model is well-fitted. In other words, the research model largely conforms to the observed data.

Figure 1.

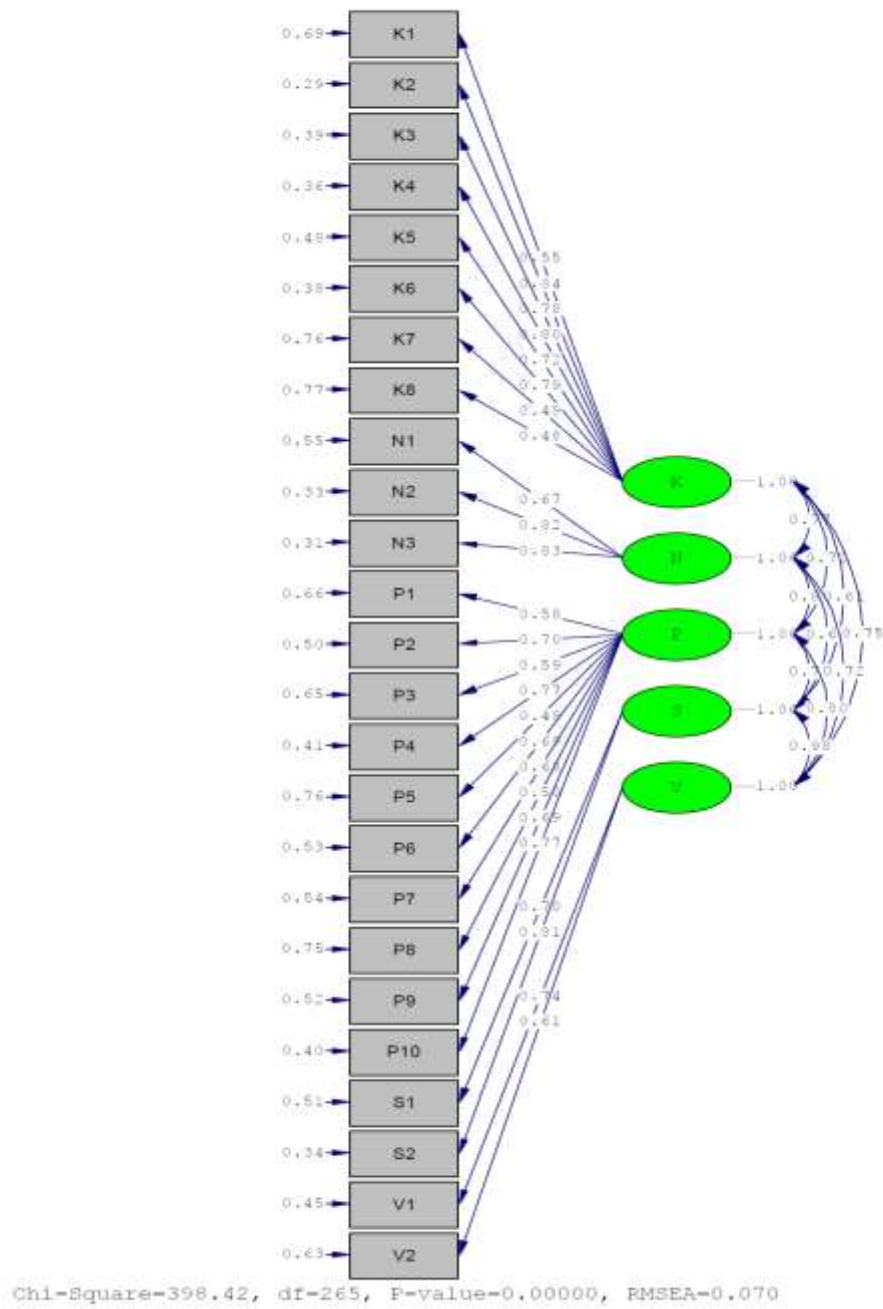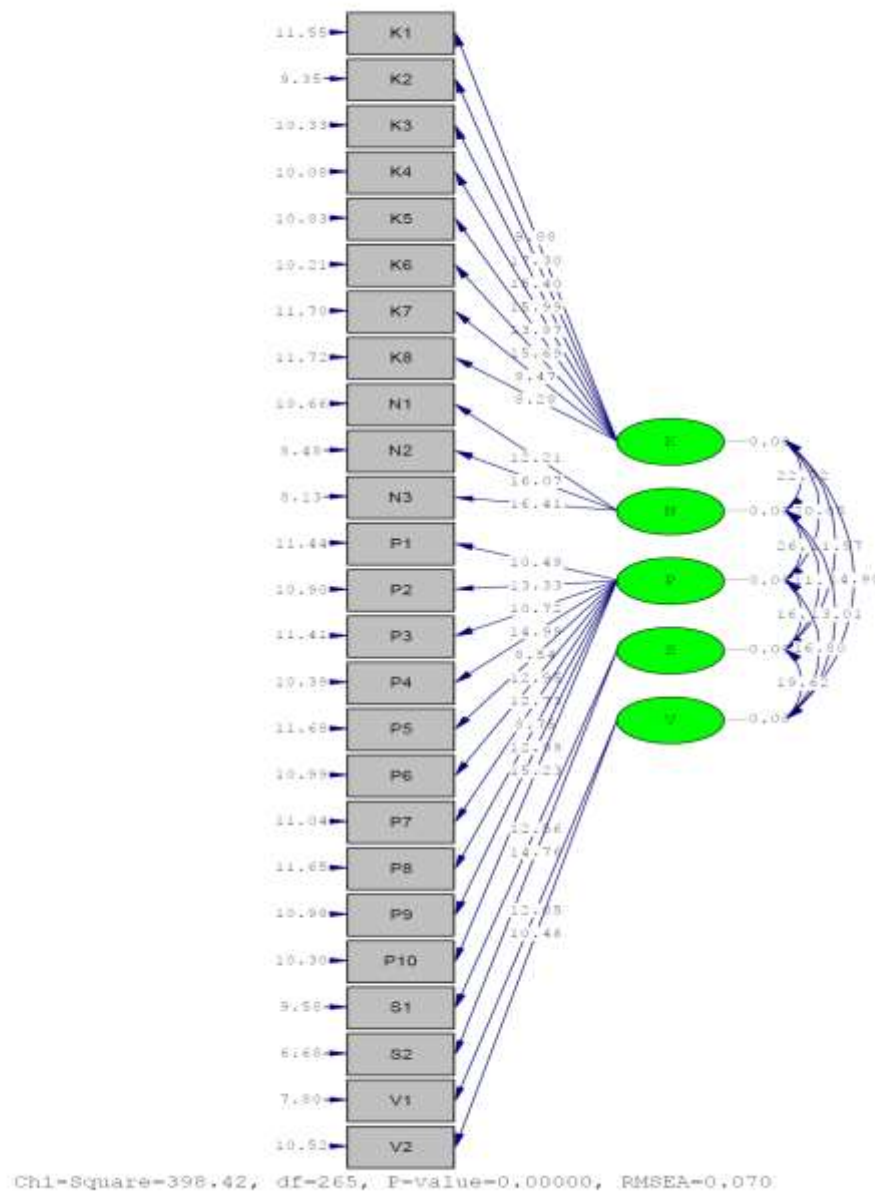*First measurement model of outcomes in standardized estimation mode.*

Figure 2.

Significance values of coefficients for the first measurement model of outcomes.

Chi-Square=398.42, df=265, P-value=0.00000, RMSEA=0.070

The next output presents the significance of coefficients and parameters obtained from the measurement model of outcomes, indicating that all coefficients are statistically significant, as the value of the significance test for each exceeds 1.96.

According to the structural equation model of first-order outcomes in both standardized estimation and significance states, it can be stated that Figure 4 shows the factor loadings of the model in the standardized estimation state, reflecting the effect size of each variable or item in explaining the variance of the main variable or factor. In other words, the factor loading represents the degree of correlation of each observed variable with the research variables (factors). Based on Figure 5, the factor loadings of each research question can be observed. For instance, the factor loading of the first outcome question is 0.55. In other words, the first question explains approximately 55% of the variance of the optimal policy variable. The error value is 0.69, which reflects the variance not explained by the first variable. Clearly, the smaller the error value, the higher the coefficient of determination and the stronger the correlation between the question and the related factor. The coefficient

of determination is a numerical value between 0 and 1, and the closer it is to 1, the greater the explained variance. As the factor loadings demonstrate, the overall factor loadings confirm convergent validity. In line with the first-order factor analysis for growth factors, the second measurement model of outcomes was executed. Again, the results indicated that the measurement model was appropriate.

Figure 3.

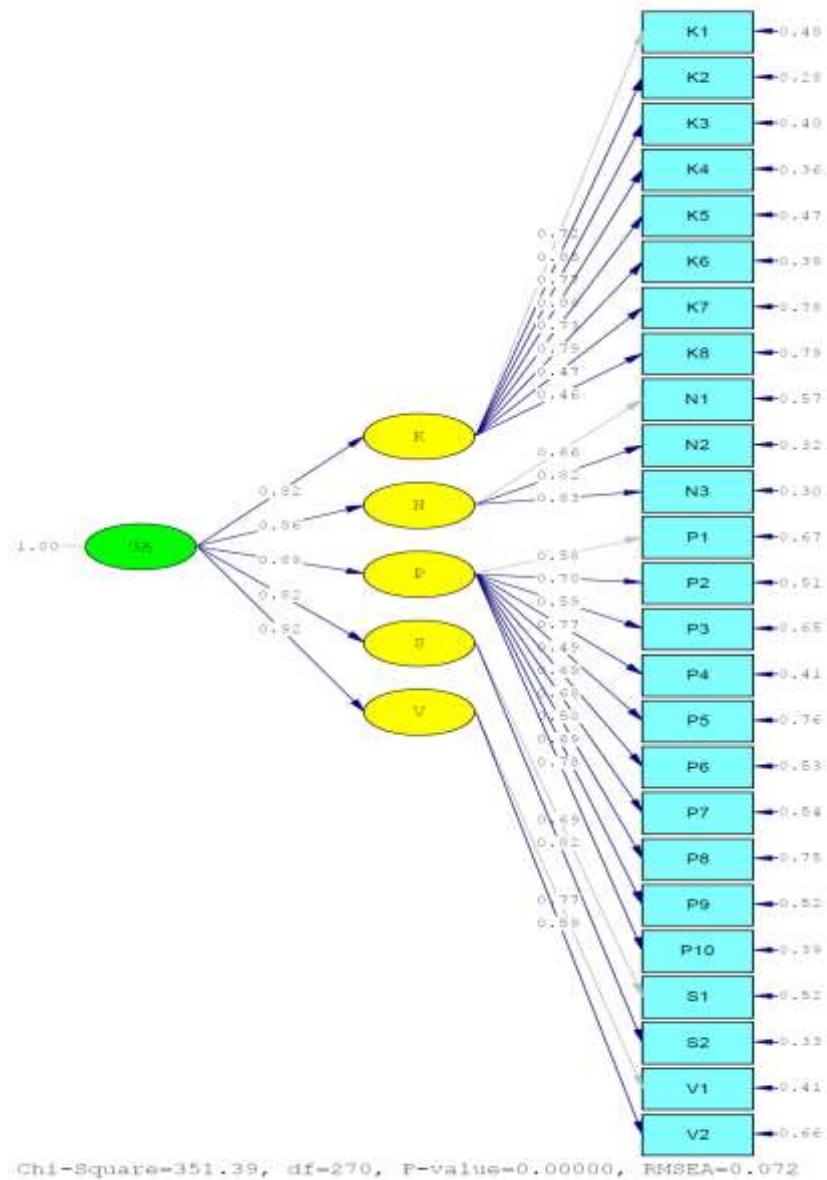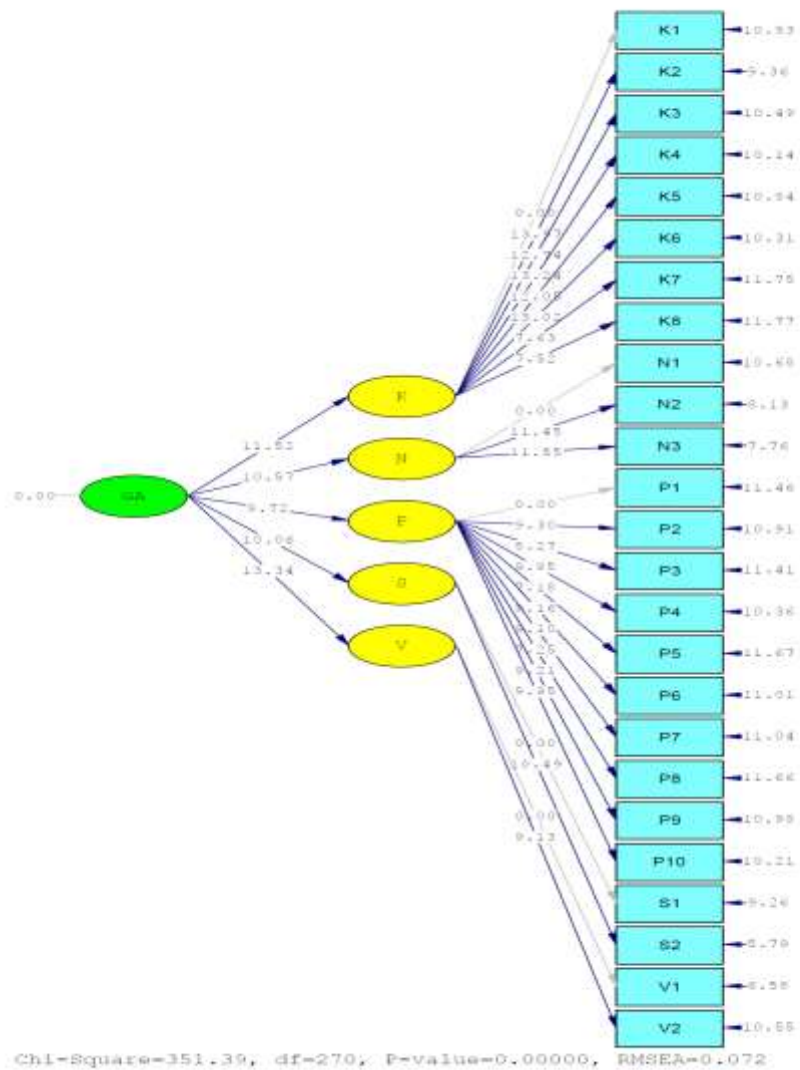*Second measurement model of outcomes in standardized estimation mode.*

Ch1-Square=351.39, df=270, P-value=0.00000, RMSEA=0.072

Figure 4.

Significance values of coefficients in the second measurement model of outcomes.

Chi-Square=351.39, df=270, P-value=0.00000, RMSEA=0.072

The fit indices of the model are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Fit Indices of the Second Measurement Model of Outcomes

Results	Desired Value	Persian Equivalent	Fit Index
0.97	0.90	Normed Fit Index	NFI
0.98	0.90	Non-Normed Fit Index	NNFI
0.99	0.90	Comparative Fit Index	CFI
0.93	0.90	Goodness of Fit Index	GFI
0.91	0.90	Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index	AGFI
1.30	<3	Chi-square/df	χ^2/df

As can be seen, the model indices indicate good model fit. The χ^2/df ratio is equal to 1.30. Furthermore, the RMSEA value (0.072) and the indices GFI (0.93), AGFI (0.91), NFI (0.97), NNFI (0.98), and CFI (0.99) all confirm the adequacy of the model. In other words, the research model is largely consistent with the observed data.

The next output shows the significance of coefficients and parameters obtained from the second measurement model of outcomes, indicating that all coefficients are significant, since the significance test values for each are greater than 1.96.

Second-order confirmatory factor analysis examines the relationship between the dimensions and concepts of outcomes. Accordingly, based on Figure 6, the second measurement model of outcomes in the standardized estimation state shows the relationship strength (factor loadings) of the dimensions. Since all factor loadings exceed 0.30, they are significant and statistically acceptable. Likewise, in the significance coefficients state (Figure 7), the t-values can be observed, all of which are greater than 1.96, making them acceptable. Given the significance of the results, the obtained indices indicate a good and desirable fit of the model. In other words, the research model is largely consistent with the observed data. Therefore, the results of the first and second measurement models of outcomes confirm the appropriateness of the research models. The relatively low chi-square ratios further indicate good fit and alignment of the research model with the observed data.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to design a compensation system model with a social justice approach in the National Iranian Oil Company. The findings demonstrated that a just compensation framework is anchored in several critical pillars, including fair laws, ethical and competent executors, public supervision, and awareness. The confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling results indicated that the designed model not only possesses statistical validity but also theoretical coherence with the concept of justice-based human resource management. These findings suggest that the integration of fairness principles into compensation practices reinforces both employee satisfaction and organizational effectiveness, a conclusion supported by much of the prior literature on compensation and justice.

The results revealed that employees perceive justice in compensation as a multidimensional construct, encompassing distributive justice (fairness of outcomes), procedural justice (fairness of processes), and interactional justice (quality of interpersonal treatment). This aligns with earlier studies emphasizing the strong link between perceptions of justice and employee attitudes toward the compensation system [5]. In particular, the study showed that when employees recognize that laws and regulations surrounding compensation are applied equitably, their trust in the system increases, leading to enhanced organizational commitment. This finding reinforces previous evidence that organizational justice acts as a mediating factor in shaping positive employee attitudes, including satisfaction, engagement, and happiness [5].

The importance of justice in compensation was also highlighted by the findings showing that virtuous and fair executors are central to the system's legitimacy. Employees are more likely to accept and comply with compensation policies when they trust those who implement them. This is consistent with Islamic principles of fairness in wage determination, where justice, ethics, and transparency are emphasized as key criteria for ensuring equity [6]. In this sense, compensation is not only an economic transaction but also a moral commitment to uphold fairness and dignity in the workplace. Such an approach is particularly vital in public organizations and state-owned enterprises, where legitimacy is strongly tied to adherence to social justice values.

Another significant outcome of the study was the confirmation that public supervision and awareness play a crucial role in reinforcing justice in compensation systems. Transparency in payment structures and accountability of decision-makers reduce perceptions of favoritism or inequity, thereby improving employee trust. This finding aligns with research on the semantics of justice in social systems, which underscores that justice must be visible and experienced collectively to maintain

legitimacy [2]. Similarly, earlier strategic frameworks for ensuring justice argued that transparency and societal oversight are necessary to sustain fairness across institutional systems [1].

The statistical analyses also indicated strong model fit indices, suggesting that the designed compensation model can effectively capture the complex relationships between justice-related constructs and organizational outcomes. This resonates with earlier attempts to design context-specific compensation systems, such as municipal employee compensation models, which also emphasized fairness, transparency, and efficiency as the main determinants of system effectiveness [13]. Furthermore, the results align with strategic compensation models in other organizational contexts, such as electric companies, where compensation was designed not only as a motivational mechanism but also as a tool for social alignment [14].

One of the important implications of this study is the link between justice-based compensation and employee retention. The findings suggested that employees who perceive fairness in compensation are less likely to leave the organization and more likely to remain committed. This outcome is in line with research emphasizing compensation as a primary factor in reducing voluntary turnover [7]. Similarly, models of employee retention consistently show that fair compensation, coupled with benefits and development opportunities, leads to improved loyalty and stability [8]. Earlier studies have further demonstrated that elite and highly skilled employees are particularly sensitive to fairness in compensation, and optimal systems can prevent the brain drain of such talents [9, 12].

The study also found that strategic compensation models incorporating social justice principles contribute to long-term organizational sustainability. This is consistent with models emphasizing succession planning and worthy-centered HR practices, which propose that compensation should be aligned with long-term justice-oriented values to ensure continuity and fairness [10]. Likewise, models designed for veterans and specialized professionals in sports highlighted the importance of symbolic recognition and justice-based rewards as tools to honor contributions and strengthen retention [11]. These parallels reinforce the argument that compensation systems must address not only financial incentives but also ethical and symbolic dimensions of justice.

At a macroeconomic level, the findings also relate to broader discussions about wage fairness and labor market dynamics. Research in the Indian context highlighted that informal employment and education–occupation mismatches significantly affect wages, raising questions about structural inequities in compensation systems [15]. The present study's emphasis on laws and fair implementation resonates with such concerns, as addressing inequities requires systemic changes in both institutional frameworks and compensation practices. Similarly, in European and American contexts, research has shown how governance, risk, and institutional factors shape compensation systems at the executive level [16, 17]. These findings underscore the universality of fairness principles, even though their practical applications may vary across cultural and institutional contexts.

Moreover, the results reinforce the idea that compensation systems are not static mechanisms but adaptive structures that must respond to crises, uncertainties, and organizational dynamics. Research on bankrupt firms has suggested that incentive-based compensation models are more effective than retention-focused plans in ensuring organizational survival and recovery [18]. This aligns with the present study's conclusion that compensation models must be grounded in justice but also flexible enough to adapt to organizational realities.

Finally, the study contributes to the theoretical discourse on advanced human resource management by integrating principles of social justice into compensation design. Previous works have called for moving beyond traditional views of HRM that focus solely on efficiency and performance, toward models that integrate justice, fairness, and sustainability [3]. The current study responds to this call by providing empirical evidence that a justice-oriented compensation model not only enhances organizational performance but also strengthens legitimacy, trust, and employee well-being.

This study, despite its contributions, faces several limitations. First, the research was conducted within a single organizational context—the National Iranian Oil Company—which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other industries or cultural settings. Second, the sample size, though sufficient for statistical analysis, was relatively limited, especially in terms of expert interviews, which may not capture the full diversity of perspectives across the organization. Third, the reliance on self-reported data, including survey responses and interview insights, may introduce biases such as social desirability or selective recall. Lastly, while the statistical modeling confirmed the validity of the proposed framework, longitudinal data would be necessary to fully assess the long-term effectiveness of the justice-based compensation model.

Future studies could expand this line of inquiry in several directions. First, comparative studies across different industries and countries would provide insights into how cultural, institutional, and economic contexts shape perceptions of justice in compensation. Second, longitudinal research could track the long-term effects of implementing justice-based compensation models on employee outcomes such as retention, performance, and engagement. Third, future research could explore the intersection of digital transformation and compensation systems, particularly how technology and data-driven HR analytics might enhance fairness and transparency. Additionally, more in-depth qualitative studies could be conducted to capture the lived experiences of employees under justice-based compensation systems, providing a richer understanding of how fairness is perceived and enacted in practice.

From a practical perspective, managers and policymakers should consider integrating social justice principles into the design and implementation of compensation systems. Organizations should prioritize transparency in their compensation structures, ensuring that employees clearly understand the rationale behind pay decisions. Training programs for managers and HR professionals should emphasize ethical implementation, fairness, and accountability in compensation practices. Moreover, organizations should establish feedback mechanisms to incorporate employee voices into compensation policy design, thereby enhancing trust and legitimacy. Finally, compensation systems should balance financial rewards with symbolic recognition, ensuring that employees not only feel fairly compensated but also valued and respected as integral members of the organization.

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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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