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Strategies for Standardizing Nurses' Pay to Mitigate Equal Pay Regulatory Fines

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
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Walden University
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MBA, Winthrop University, 1996

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Business leaders face pressure from community and government officials to standardize employee wages. Fines and litigation risks can be substantial for employers who fail to comply with equal pay regulations. Grounded in the wage devaluation theory and the equity theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies healthcare leaders use to standardize wages and ensure compliance with equal pay regulations. Participants were four senior healthcare human resource leaders of private nonprofit hospital systems in the United States who have been successful in standardizing wages and in being compliant with equal pay regulations. Data were collected through semistructured interviews, public website materials, and publications from state and federal regulatory agencies. Through thematic analysis, four major themes emerged: implementation of strategies to standardize pay structure, defined pay structure, leadership support, and respect for the nursing profession. A key recommendation is for leaders in healthcare to be proactive and perform pay equity audits to comply with regulatory agencies. Implications for positive social change include the potential for healthcare leaders to foster more effective and empathetic leadership, thereby increasing the ability to find and retain more experienced nurses to provide quality care to patients.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my late grandmother. She was the rock and foundation of our family, and memories of her will forever live on in each of us. She was here with us when I started this journey. Now that I have finished, I know that she is smiling down on me from heaven. Her strength and resilience were nothing short of amazing, and I will forever strive to make her proud. Thank you, God, for blessing us with such a beautiful spirit and for helping me along this journey.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my current committee members, Dr. Annie Brown, committee chairperson and Dr. Wen-Wen Chien, second committee member, for their support and valuable input. Thank you, Dr. Brown, for making room for me on your impeccable team of scholars. Thank you, Dr. Chien, for your keen attention to detail. I knew from the accounting classes I had with you that your feedback would be both informative and constructive.

I would also like to thank my former committee chair, Dr. Marilyn Simon, for her wisdom and guidance before she retired. At each setback or delay, Dr. Simon repeatedly reminded me of the old teaching adage on the complexities and non-linear relationships researchers may encounter. She would often say, “Research is messy”. She encouraged me to never give up and remain steadfast. I feel blessed to have been mentored by each one of these amazing educators.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Controlling labor costs is difficult for most employers. Labor costs are total expenditures incurred by employers for employment of employees (Hemenway, 2020). Business leaders face social concerns from community and government officials involving regulating wages. Federal and state regulators issue regulations that affect compensation and other employment matters. Penalties and fees for employers not complying with these regulations vary significantly. Business leaders should take heed of current and proposed federal and state equal pay legislation, proactively review pay practices, and consider social needs when determining wage base formulas (Lamb & Klein, 2015; Lobel, 2020; Rosado, 2018; Szto et al., 2021).

Background of the Problem

Gender wage equality requires employers to pay men and women the same if performing the same job in the same organization; however, wage inequality continues to exist in many fields. According to Mishel and Kandra (2020), U.S. income inequality is worsening in workplaces. The earnings of the top 1% of wage earners nearly doubled from 7.3% in 1979 to 13.2% in 2019, while over the same period, average annual wages for the bottom 90% of wage earners stayed in the $30,000 range. Pay equity continues to be a problem.

Equal pay legislation eliminates years of prolonged pay disparities between men and women (Hemenway, 2020). Key federal legislation and proposals such as the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, Equal Pay Act of 1963, Lilly Ledbetter Act of 2009, and Paycheck Fairness Act as well as state and local legislation grew significantly in the 21st

century. Regulatory effects of legislation make it difficult for employers to defend equal pay claims made by employees effectively (Hemenway, 2020). This trend will likely persist.

An effective compensation system is vital to overall operations of businesses. Pay practices vary from company to company, and multiple factors determine pay equity. Due to increases in equal pay legislation with business fines ranging from 25 to thousands of dollars and unlimited compensatory or punitive damages for plaintiffs, business leaders proactively reform compensation practices to prevent violations (Porter, 2014; Yi & Baggott, 2016). For example, in response to salary history bans, business leaders of major corporations such as Bank of America, Wells Fargo, and Amazon eliminated pay history inquiries from employment pay practices (Barnett, 2018).

Problem Statement

Women make up about half of the workforce, yet they earn less than men in every occupation for which there are sufficient earnings data for both men and women to calculate earnings ratios (England et al., 2020; Ferns et al., 2021; Yaish et al., 2021). The proportion of women in occupations affects pay, due to devaluations of work women do (Mandel & Rotman, 2022). In 2017, 42 states had proposals for equal pay guidelines similar to those according to the federal Paycheck Fairness Act, with business fines in the thousands of dollars as a result of noncompliance (Hutson et al., 2023). The general business problem is devaluated wages in female-dominated occupations like nursing are unsustainable. The specific business problem is some nursing healthcare and human

resource leaders lack strategies to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders in the United States use to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines. The targeted population was four nursing healthcare human resource leaders from four private nonprofit hospitals in the United States which comply with state equal pay regulations. The study has implications for positive social change because strategies to standardize wages and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines could level competition for nurses, thereby making it easier for leaders of healthcare facilities to use resources to find and retain experienced nurses and provide improved caregiving services to patients.

Nature of the Study

The qualitative research method was most appropriate for this study. The three most common research methods are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed. The intent of qualitative research is exploratory (Saunders et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was to explore and develop a meaningful understanding of strategies healthcare and human resource leaders use to determine equitable wages and identify how those leaders mitigate fines due to violations of regulatory equal pay legislation. Researchers use the qualitative research method to establish in-depth understanding of complex issues.

Quantitative and mixed research methods were not suitable for this study. Quantitative researchers use hypothesis testing to evaluate relevance of theories and

analyzing relationships. This was not the intent of this study. The mixed methods design is suitable when neither qualitative nor quantitative approaches alone are sufficient for the overall purpose of a study (Saunders et al., 2015). I rejected the quantitative approach because the focus of the study was not relationships between variables. I also rejected mixed methods because the qualitative methodology alone was sufficient for exploring strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines.

I considered four qualitative designs for this study: the case study design, ethnography, phenomenological design, and narrative design. According to Yin (2018), the case study design is appropriate for a study with a small number of participants and unstructured data that may contain sensitive information. The multiple case study design was appropriate for research involving a bounded system of operations across various groups, such as general versus specialty hospitals.

I rejected the phenomenological research design, as meanings of participants' personal experiences was not the focus of the study. This design is suitable with personal views of participants who have experienced a phenomenon rather than actual outcomes (Crick, 2021). In ethnography studies, researchers observe cultural influence on people's behavior individually or as ensembles (Yin, 2018). The intent of this study was not to focus on effects of culture on participants' behaviors but rather strategies to standardize wages and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines. Therefore, the ethnographic design was also not applicable. The narrative research design is suitable for studies addressing life stories of individual participants (Saunders et al., 2015). Life stories of nursing healthcare

and human resource leaders of facilities that comply with equal pay legislation were irrelevant in terms of strategies to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines; therefore, I rejected this design.

Research Question

What strategies do nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate the cost of equal pay regulatory fines?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you find effective for standardizing a wage structure in nursing to comply with equal pay regulations and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines?
2. How do the leaders in your organization assess the effectiveness of the strategies to standardize wages and comply with equal pay regulations?
3. What were the principal issues you considered before developing and implementing strategies to standardize wages and mitigate the cost of equal pay regulatory fines?
4. What procedures did you follow to implement strategies to standardize wages and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines?
5. What key challenges affected your ability to implement strategies to standardize wages and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines?
6. How did you address the key challenges to implementing the strategies for standardizing wages and mitigating equal pay regulatory fines?
7. How do you think your strategy regarding assurance of fair compensation influences your recruitment process?

8. How did you address the issue that business leaders may view historically female occupations, such as nursing, as less valued than historically male occupations?
9. What other relevant information about your organization's strategies to standardize wages and comply with equal pay regulations would you like to share?

Conceptual Framework

The occupational wage devaluation theory and Adams' equity theory were the conceptual frameworks that helped guide this study. Hodge and Hodge (1965) stated societies culturally devalue women, which negatively affects their wages. The occupational wage devaluation theory is an appropriate lens for addressing legislative rulings regarding salary history inquiries and pay secrecy as well as pay strategies that offset decreases in earnings in occupations as the proportion of female workers increases. In the case of occupational assimilation, worker rewards decrease as the proportion of purportedly-less valued workers becomes a majority (Hodge & Hodge, 1965). The occupational wage devaluation theory was suitable for exploring strategies used by occupational nursing healthcare and human resource leaders to standardize wages and mitigate costs due to equal pay regulations.

The equity theory is a fairness theory that involves the balance between worker inputs and outputs. This theory is used to assess inputs or work of associated parties to determine if managers have equally distributed outputs such as wages to these parties. According to Carrell and Dittrich (1978), employees not only consider overall fairness of compensation systems, but also feel strongly about equity of work-to-pay ratio of employees. The equity theory is a motivational theory that is applicable to understanding

this study's findings. Balanced inputs and outputs due to standardized wage strategies could lead to fewer equal pay regulatory fines.

Operational Definitions

Gender Wage Gap (GWG): Difference in wage earnings between women and men in the same job (Bosch & Barit, 2020).

Human Capital: Personal factors that are considered useful for a job, such as education, skills, or knowledge (Ochsenfeld, 2014).

Pay Equity: Eliminating sex and race discrimination in wage-setting systems with identical pay for identical work (Lobel, 2020).

Pay Transparency: Making pay data available to those other than employers (Lobel, 2020).

Regulation in Government: Rules or mechanisms that limit, steer, or otherwise control social behavior. Federal agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission often issue regulations.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions include factors that are beyond the researcher's scope. Limitations are the conditions that constrain how the research study is applicable, and delimitations are boundaries within which research is viable and controlled by researchers (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021).

Assumptions

For this study, I assumed all participants were honest about their experiences and knowledge on the topic when answering interview questions. I assumed the best sample

of participants was from hospitals with no current equal pay violations. I further assumed that healthcare managers and human resource leaders had insights regarding nursing wages for hospital systems. Since participation was voluntary and sampling was purposive, I met assumptions.

Limitations

This study also had limitations. Limitations refer to issues that the researcher cannot control (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021). According to Yin (2018), a large part of data in qualitative studies is interview data. Participants' memories limited interview data and interview times. This is because hospital staff schedules can be sporadic, with long hours.

Delimitations

Researchers preset delimitations for studies (Yin, 2018). One delimitation of the study was the geographical location of the small sample size. The state laws of these multistate hospital systems may not be representative of all hospital systems. The study included only healthcare leaders and human resource leaders from United States hospitals with no pending Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) wage complaints or fines.

Significance of the Study

Business leaders continually seek strategies that foster positive social change and mitigate costs of complying with government regulations. They may use results from this study to add to current compensation practices to attract and retain the best employees and reduce investor risk due to lawsuit damages.

Contribution to Business Practice

Making business investments to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements is critical to healthcare business sustainability. New state regulations regarding equal pay increased litigation risks by shifting the burden of proof to employers in terms of wage differentials based on factors other than sex (FOTS; Lamb & Klein, 2015). Investors seek to invest in companies whose leaders have addressed accountability and liability concerns by proactively reviewing compensation practices for transparency in order to protect owner investments from potential litigation losses (Sheehy & Farneti, 2021). Business leaders may use findings from this study to develop compliant business practices that involve corporate social responsibility and protecting wealth creation for investors. These practices will improve business sustainability.

Business leaders may also use study findings to improve business practices and retain nurses. High costs to recruit, train, and replace nurses are associated with high turnover rate of nurses caused by factors such as poor working conditions, burnout, and job dissatisfaction (Gebregziabher et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2025). Salary is a common reason for job dissatisfaction (NSI Nursing Solutions, 2019). Most nursing leaders expressed a strategic need to decrease turnover rates, but less than half of them had formalized plans of action (NSI Nursing Solutions, 2019). Leaders could use results from this study to formalize plans that could potentially reduce excessive costs of nursing turnover.

Implications for Social Change

Findings from this study could positively affect nursing professionals and their interactions with communities in which they live and work. Approximately 12% of all households are female-headed (Statista, 2018). Standardization of wages for women in professions such as nursing may significantly affect society because those wages are the primary source of support for family members in female-headed households. In addition, strategies that are applied to standardize wages and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines could positively affect employee job satisfaction. Implications for social change include the possibility of having more nurses providing caregiving services for patients and extra funds to support healthcare programs that promote health and wellbeing for communities in which nurses serve (Peck, 2020). That provides benefits for both hospitals and communities.

A Review of Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines. The intent of the literature review was to identify knowledge gaps and justify the research aim. Conducting the literature review was fundamental to understanding healthcare facility nursing jobs and strategies that are used to standardize wages for mitigating costs of equal pay regulatory fines. A critical analysis and synthesis of literature follows involving the occupational wage devaluation theory and Adams' equity theory, federal and state equal pay legislation, and compensation practices.

The intent of the literature review was to conduct a broad and balanced search of social and business-related scholarly journals, dissertations, books, government statistical reports, websites, and social media platforms. I used the following databases: ProQuest, ABI/INFORM Global, ABI/INFORM Collection, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, ScienceDirect, and EBSCOHost through the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. I focused on both quantitative and qualitative sources. I used the following search terms: *occupational wage devaluation*, *nursing gender pay differentials*, *gender pay gap*, *pay equity*, *federal and state equal pay regulations*, *compensation strategies*, *remuneration structures*, *public and private hospitals*, *salary history*, and *pay secrecy*. Of the 142 sources, 72% were peer-reviewed articles and 49% were published between 2020 and 2025.

Occupational Wage Devaluation and Equity Theories

The study involved using the occupational wage devaluation and equity theories. These theories align with my focus on strategies to standardize wages for equitable pay in predominantly female occupations. I also reviewed literature on other theories in various equal pay research studies.

Occupational Wage Devaluation Theory

Researchers examine heuristic thinking and cognizant biases to understand market devaluation effect son wages in female-dominated occupations (Ferrell et al., 2017). Leuze and Strauss (2016) found professions with a high saturation of women have lower wages and augmented pay gaps. This resulted in atypical empirical results for occupations with highly-qualified individuals such as university professors. However,

applying new thinking to problems can result in positive outcomes with socially groundbreaking effects as the primary role of working females in continues to change. Future research could target occupations involving caring or service tasks. Researchers could apply heuristic thinking in studies focused on the nursing occupation.

Women choose more family-friendly and caring professions with reduced work times and higher than minimum wages, which allow for breaks in work cycles (Leuze & Strauss, 2016). This does not, however, explain why these professions eventually lead to lower pay compared male-dominated professions. There is a lack of studies examining gender differences and flexible working arrangements such as breaks in work cycles. This lack of research may be the reason there is no clear explanation regarding why female-dominated professions with flexible working arrangements have lower wages compared to male-dominated professions.

National policies and economic circumstances affect organizational culture and work arrangement policies. Chung (2019) determined the persistent wage gap may be due to jobs with flexible working arrangements and schedule control access varies across countries in Europe. Similarly, Alon et al. (2020) found economic crisis conditions significantly affect care and service industries. Thus, employers in predominantly female occupations in some countries are less likely to offer schedule control to employees compared to employers of professions that are equally male and female-occupied (Chung, 2019). Employers may not otherwise compensate women who are working in low-paying female-dominated occupations in countries with certain adverse economic conditions due to flexible working arrangements.

COVID-19 is an example of a crisis with different economic impacts on male and female workforces. Most economic downturns adversely affect male-dominated worker occupations such as construction and manufacturing (Alon et al., 2020). The COVID-19 crisis adversely affected care and service occupations that were dominated by female workers. Short-term implications of gender inequality for households with no childcare options due to school and daycare closures are unfavorable (Chauhan, 2020). These households include many female-headed households.

Adverse implications regarding care and service industries may affect business sustainability. Ntuli and Kwenda (2020) stated the wellbeing of women affects world poverty. Thus, studies on the gender divide in the labor market are essential, especially in underdeveloped regions. Ntuli and Kwenda noted women outnumbered men in service and caregiver jobs. Hodge and Hodge (1965) stated the sizable percentage of women negatively impacted wages of caregiver and service occupations. Ntuli and Kwenda concluded gender discrimination, human capital factors, and self-employment were key drivers of gender wage gaps in the Sub-Saharan region.

Feminization in healthcare is associated with significant gaps between women's and men'' pay (Zhang et al., 2025). From a sociological perspective, gendered apportionments in the labor market indicate devaluation of wages for female workers (Murphy & Oesch, 2016). Conversely, Pietrykowski (2017) referred to this effect as a wage bonus for caring skills in high-wage male occupations. Caring skills in low-wage occupations such as healthcare and childcare leads to incurring wage penalties, unlike wage bonuses in high-wage occupations such as surgery and policing.

Controls for human capital drivers, such as education and job-specific training, help eliminate those human capital drivers as causal factors (Murphy & Oesch, 2016). Pietrykowski (2017) stated work tasks and worker gender correlate with the occupational wage devaluation effect. Thus, caring tasks garner less pay than other jobs in terms of worker composition.

Murphy and Oesch (2016) indicated the impact of feminization on wages was not linear with professions that were 60% female, and in the move from male to female-dominated occupations, individual earnings decreased by 13%. Mandel (2018) argued the entry of women into occupations reduces the perceived value of the occupation, and consequently, pay. Wages declined as the percentage of female workers increased.

Researchers perform quantitative studies to test for relationships between factors such as gender and employee pay perceptions. Wulf (2017) found a significant relationship between gender identity and perceptions of performance pay fairness. Employers in the United States could use results of this study in hiring practices.

Wage inequalities persist. Addison et al. (2018) argued that disagreements regarding size and the cause of occupational gender wage gaps are the main reasons this phenomenon still exists. Employers of female-dominated occupations pay workers less wages and value workers less than male-dominated occupation employers (Leuze & Strauss, 2016; Mandel, 2018; Pietrykowski, 2017). In occupations requiring caregiving skills, wages devaluate as the percentage of women workers increases. Magnusson (2009) found a nonlinear relationship between the proportion of women in an occupation and its prestige. Magnusson concluded women-dominated caring occupations did not

have lower prestige. Lower wages for women-dominated care occupations could be related to differences between men's and women's negotiation skills (Magnusson, 2009).

Adams' Equity Theory

The equity theory, proposed by Adams (1963), helped guide this study. This theory evolved from the social comparison theory and the premise that people compare themselves to others to determine worthiness (Sahito & Vaisnen, 2017). Researchers use Adams' equity theory in workplace motivational and job satisfaction empirical studies to investigate equity in terms of promotion opportunities, pay administration, and evaluation criteria. Adams considered inequity a significant issue for business and government. Adams' equity theory was used in this study to view what nurses perceive as fair and equitable pay.

Some employees do not perceive pay differences as unfair. Those employees use social comparisons to justify pay differences (Oing, 2020). Unlike the equity theory, the system justification theory is a lens for understanding justification of gender wage gaps in the workplace. According to Hogue and Cardamone (2011), companies use job responsibility, work conditions, job complexity, and job scope to evaluate positions..

The employer-employee relationship is critical to economic stability. Employees significantly influence business operations (Inuwa, 2017). Shahimi et al. (2019) found service industry hotel employees perceive pay outputs not in alignment with worker inputs and benefits are not substitutes. Pay equity is beneficial to business productivity and employee job motivation (Shahimi et al., 2019). When outputs from work inputs are not in balance, feelings of inequity arise among individuals, and job rankings do not

result in equitable wage structures (Adams, 1963). Adams' equity theory involves employees' expectations of fair compensation as equal to the work performed by them compared to work performed by other employees. Business leaders should educate their employees on work gender stereotypes and biases (Shahimi et al., 2019). Managers could be pivotal in engineering this type of training.

Rosado (2018) conducted a qualitative study on wage gaps in the private sector of the state of Georgia. The researchers recruited the eleven participants for this study via social media and questioned them about male-dominated stereotypes, gender biases, and pay secrecy in their workplace. Rosado analyzed data using a descriptive design method to identify categories that three-year-tenured employees perceived as behaviors related to the wage gap. According to Rosado, employees will not perform well if they perceive differences in job inputs and outputs.

The equity theory guides leaders in building an equitable compensation structure. The theory addresses the needs of members of an occupation (Freeman, 2019). Expected inputs and outputs of members being equal affect individual and group expectations. The matching of inputs and outputs is how employees measure the fairness of compensational rewards (Inuwa & Idris, 2017). Kollmann et al. (2020) used the equity theory to examine the equitability of monetary outputs to task inputs for workers of different age groups. These researchers found that the younger managers were more dissatisfied than the older employees with low monetary outputs in exchange for large inputs. Leader may need toto further bifurcate task rewards into specific categories by age groups.

There are many different ways to define worker inputs. According to Inuwa (2017), employees equate inputs to intelligence levels, educational levels, training, skills, experience, seniority, and overall effort put into doing work tasks. Inuwa also argued that gender is an input. Researchers conduct empirical studies guided by the lens of other theories, such as the human capital theory, to determine if these types of inputs are factors in the gender wage gap (Lim, 2016; Ochsenfeld, 2014). Inuwa considers wage levels to be one of the major outputs that employees receive and compares them to the wages of other employees. Amid regulatory changes, leaders in the workplace could use compensational strategies to reconcile the employee's inputs with output rewards to align the goals of managers, shareholders, and regulators (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2018).

Other Theories

Occupational feminization theory studies contradict the occupational wage devaluation theory. There is a lack of research studies guided by the occupational feminization theory. According to Ochsenfeld (2014), the occupation wage devaluation theory counters social propaganda pushing females into male-dominated, lucrative science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields of study. Researchers such as Sterling et al. (2020) and Lim (2016) did studies to address this paradox. Lim and Sterling et al. examined the wage gap specifically among STEM college graduates. Lim challenged the myth that the wage gap no longer exists because of education level improvements. Sterling et al. argued that the gender wage gap exists when STEM graduates begin work. Thus, the entrance of women into STEM careers may not reduce the gender wage gap.

Local and national legislation has prompted more studies on how employees perceive gender pay gaps. Scholars like Smit and Montag-Smit (2019) implied that social implications and economic reasons drive pay transparency and gender pay policy designs. They found that employees can be uncomfortable sharing or knowing pay information, which could potentially narrow the gender wage gap. To preserve social status in the workplace, an equal percentage of employees prefer not to compare or have others compare worker salary information as those that like to have that capability.

Workers' opinions on the issue vary. Vasina and Sloka (2019) used the social role theory to explain how societal beliefs and stereotypes determine gender roles in professions. In addition to the effect of role stereotypes on wage gaps, Vasina and Sloka hypothesized that the woman's choice of a safe work environment contributed to the small number of women participating in certain occupations. In Latvia, the lowest wage gap in 2016 was in the construction and public administration fields. Vasina and Sloka felt that a low female workforce in construction and government regulations for public administration jobs, contributed to these results. The most significant wage gap in Latvia was in financial services and healthcare, professions stigmatized by role stereotypes.

Gaiaschi (2019) examined the causes of pay differences for physicians in public and private hospitals. Gaiaschi targeted physicians in Italy and surmised that human capital characteristics such as education and training cannot solely explain the gender pay gap. Gaiaschi hypothesized that marriage and parenthood negatively affects women's pay while positively affecting men's pay. The researcher examined these effects in different structural settings by surveying participants. Controlling for human

characteristic differences, Gaiaschi found that women physicians earned an average of 18% less than men. The pay gap was more significant in private hospitals than in public hospitals, and as predicted, the differences in marriage and parenthood were positive for men and negative for women.

Many scholars believe specific human capital attributes are the cause of pay gaps. Like Gaiaschi (2019), Sawicka and Stolarczyk (2019) evaluated human capital characteristics and the gender pay gap. According to Sawicka and Stolarczyk, the lack of equal opportunities in the workforce create economic losses. They felt that human capital factors, such as education and training, affect social well-being, employee earnings, entrepreneurship sustainability, and the growth of the economy. There is a correlation between equality in opportunities and economic development.

Another theory sometimes used in gender wage gap research is Maslow hierarchy of needs. Yarbrough (2018) examined the pay gap and the employee's perception of pay fairness through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. Like the equity theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs purports that an employee can perceive a compensation system as fair if it meets their needs (Yarbrough, 2018). Human Resource leaders play a significant part in developing policies to meet the needs of employees. Examples include Chick-fil-A's scholarship plan, Costco's dental and medical benefits, and Starbucks employee stock options.

Equal Pay Legislation

Although highly controversial, legislators sometimes enact gender pay legislation for several reasons. Regulators issued wage regulations in the 1930s due to wage

irregularities (Kulow, 2013). During World War II, women entered the workforce, and their work garnered a lower value than that of male workers. Employers listed lower pay scales for women than men in publicized job postings (Kulow, 2013). These postings inevitably drew attention, and that attention became more pronounced during the social and political unrest of the 1960s. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, women's organizations such as the Women's Trade Union protested low wages and long hours for women workers (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2014). Thus, legislators passed more laws protecting women's wages and civil liberties. These laws enacted more defined recourses for violations (Watkins, 2018). Opponents of the legislation found the equal pay difficult to define and argued that enforcement of violations would be difficult (Brake, 2016). Only a handful of states at the time had laws that addressed gender pay; however, that changed.

Globally, leaders have issued legislation to address the gender pay gap. Ebrahim (2017) reviewed the primary equal pay legislation in the United Kingdom and South Africa to determine which parties the legislation covered. Ebrahim analyzed sections of the Employment Equity Act and Labour Relations Act to highlight protections set forth for parties of temporary, part-time, and fixed-term workers. Ebrahim's objective was to prove how limited equal pay legislation is in certain situations. The United Kingdom's legislation protected all employees, while the South African legislation did not apply gender and race guidelines for atypical workers.

Pay equity policies are effective in many situations. Douglas and Ravenswood (2019) examined the change in the pay gap in New Zealand from 1999 to 2017 due to

proposed amendments to the Equal Pay Act of 1972, which addressed equal pay and pay equity for female-dominated occupations. They first discussed the period from 1999 to 2008, under a labor-led government that introduced policies regarding inequality. During the labor-led government period, researchers addressed gender inequities systematically by using resources such as a job evaluation tool to help maintain fair pay and eliminate bias (Douglas & Ravenswood, 2019). The national-led government took control in 2008 and returned the country to a business concentration. Early in that period, the gender pay gap drastically increased to 37.5%. The government stepped in again to address gender issues after gender-specific court cases threatened to pay out a large sum of money. The Pay Equity Settlement Act of 2017 passed and increased wages for thousands of women. However, Douglas and Ravenswood felt the government rushed implementation.

Domestically, since the 1960s, federal and state legislators in the United States passed equal pay laws with harsh penalties for employers found non-compliant. The fines increased, and compensatory damages are unlimited (Porter, 2014). Leaders are apprehensive of the effect on business sustainability (Lamb & Klein, 2015). Regulators urge HR leaders to review policies and make modifications to comply with new and pending legislation (Lobel, 2020). HR leaders can then address any ongoing business concerns.

Legislative Regulations

Government regulations enable officials worldwide to protect individuals and organizations. Lobel (2020) argued more regulatory help is necessary to eliminate the gender wage gap. However, Dechezlepretre and Sato (2017) proclaimed that government

legislation and regulations negatively impact business operations. Regulatory risk is a significant risk worldwide for business operations and investments (Choi et al., 2016). Thus, Choi et al. (2016) maintain that regulatory risk management is as necessary for enterprises as managing operating costs.

Organizational leaders and scholars are either unfamiliar with or apprehensive of the growing preponderance of equal pay legislation (Porter, 2014). The central focus of emerging pay equity regulations is to create wage adjustments by increasing the flow of wage market information and eliminating the remaining pay gap (Lobel, 2020). Kulow (2013) supported mandated wage transparency laws. Although government officials urge business leaders to proactively review compensation records and reform hiring practices (Lamb & Klein, 2015; Lobel, 2020), many leaders do not know how to work with local, state, or federal authorities to make necessary changes (Cullen, 2024). Thus, conversation surrounding legislative regulations amongst scholars will likely help business practitioners.

Business leaders lack the necessary strategies to standardize wages. The cost of complying with government regulations and noncompliance can be a significant expense to organizations (Choi et al., 2016). Ultimately, Parken and Ashworth (2018) questioned whether employers are held accountable for company pay differences, and researchers urge leaders of public organizations to guide private organizations in making pay practice changes. Leaders in public organizations may be more familiar with and less alarmed by government regulations.

Literature shows significant differences in how countries enforce specific labor laws. Some studies focused on the stringency of the laws, indicating that countries with strict laws enforce regulations less (Kanbur & Ronconi, 2018). Kanbur and Ronconi (2018) discussed the key constructs for measuring labor laws' effectiveness. First, they discussed the key components of measuring labor law enforcement by countries based on procedures set up to find non-compliant employers and based on the government issuing penalties and fines. Their empirical study found that developed countries had more inspectors per employee, and the average fines were higher in developed countries, while prison sentences were higher in poorer countries. Studies based on the stringency of the law may indicate that countries with stricter laws enforce regulations less.

Federal Gender Pay Legislation

Congress enacted several acts of legislation to prevent wage disparities. In 1938, the legislative body passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, establishing minimum wage, overtime wage, and youth employment guidelines (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2014). Legislators addressed pay disparities between men and women doing equal work in the 1963 Equal Pay Act (Porter, 2014). With the Equal Pay Act, Congress mandated equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Watkins, 2018). When the Equal Pay Act passed, women earned only $ .59 for every dollar men earned, and in 2019, women earned $.80 for every dollar men earned (Mello, 2019). The difference in pay between men and women has decreased.

The passage of the EPA met with much contention. Watkins (2018) contends that the EPA legislation effectively reduces pay discrimination, but the pay gap still exists.

The EPA allows employers to use the factors-other-than-sex (FOTS) defense to justify pay differences, and the act loosely defines equal work. Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act followed the Equal Pay Act (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2014). Title VII protects employees from race and gender discrimination in hiring, layoffs, and promotions. Later, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 amended the 180-day filing period limitation in which an employee could file a claim with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for inequality in wages under the Title VII Civil Rights Act (Lloyd & Aho, 2021; Yi & Baggott, 2016).

The Paycheck Fairness Act (PFA), a critical and heavily researched piece of pay equity legislation, has not passed Congress. The Senate introduced the PFA first in 2017 and later in 2019. According to Porter (2014), the objections posed by business leaders against the PFA include the availability of unlimited compensatory or punitive damages for the plaintiff, the increased scrutiny of bona fide factors as a defense for employers, and the elimination of market factors for a defense such as prior salary. According to Watkins (2018), a survey showed that eighty-four percent of employers use salary history in pay decisions. Watkins purported that the Equal Pay Act of 1963 effectively reduced pay discrimination. However, the pay gap still exists because employers base an employee's starting wage on previous salary.

Some leaders question whether or not salary history inquiry bans are effective. Gottsacker (2020) agreed with Watkins (2018) that salary history inquiries perpetuate the gender pay gap. Gottsacker felt that the circuit court's decision in favor of Aileen Rizzo (Rizzo v. Yovino) to eliminate salary history inquiries was a helpful step in eliminating

pay disparities. In the Rizo v. Yozino case, courts ruled that prior salary could not be a factor other than sex. Aileen Rizo had two degrees and years of experience; however, her employer hired her at a much lower salary than the male math consultants. The employer justified the pay difference based on her prior salary history. According to Timpson (2019), courts ruled that a system that set pay based on previous salary would only inflate pay disparities. Courts concluded that FOTS must be job-related and not a business-related factor designed to save business money. The lower salary is not justifiable even if the woman accepts a lower salary (Timpson, 2019). Timpson contends that this ruling allows women to question their salaries and how they are determined. As a result of that ruling, the courts changed their verdict in the 1982 Kouba case.

Watkins referred to factors other than sex as a catchall defense that job evaluation factors should limit. Watkins noted that employers use the factors-other-than-sex exception more than any other defense. Brake (2016) declared that the ban on the factors-other-than-sex (FOTS) defense is the most contentious change included in the proposed Paycheck Fairness Act (PFA) in Congress. The author wrote that even supporters of closing the equal pay gap think this provision of the PFA is not adoptable.

Another controversial topic of the PFA is pay secrecy. The PFA also includes fines for employers opposing pay discussions among employees (Watkins, 2018). With the passage of the PFA, the Department of Labor could gather wage data from employers (Lamb & Klein, 2015). The public availability and discussion of pay data are conducive to pay transparency. Most employers feel this action threatens pay secrecy of the business

compensation plan, which these employers use as a competitive tool in the market (Estlund, 2014). Pay secrecy continues to be a contentious topic for employers.

State Gender Pay Legislation

Since the PFA failed to pass in Congress, state legislatures proposed and passed additional legislation to address pay disparities. According to Lobel (2020), states followed the deliberations surrounding the FOTS provisions of the PFA. According to Safstrom (2019), state legislatures act in response to moves made by the federal government. The states' role as civil rights advocates is to protect the vulnerable (Safstrom, 2019). Thus, they offer protective legislation and preemptive laws to prevent local governments from acting contrary to citizens' rights.

Many states removed prior salary history from the discussion. In 2016 Massachusetts forbid current or previous employers' salary inquiries during the hiring process (Lobel, 2020). New York, Delaware, Oregon, California, Illinois, Maryland, Connecticut, and New Jersey are among 42 states with proposed or passed legislation with possible compensatory and punitive damages. Each state worked to narrow the wage gap between men and women.

In stark contrast, Michigan and Wisconsin legislatures decided to prevent any laws on salary history or informational bans on employers (Lobel, 2020). Results from a study by Barach and Horton (2021) indicate that employer access to wage history would benefit low-wage earners. Employers may offer women workers less pay when the law prohibits employers from requesting prior salary information (Mello, 2019). These

conflicting results reveal why some states legislatures may not want to ban salary history inquires.

Compensation Management

Researchers continue to find new ways to study the persistent gender pay gap Saari et al. (2017) explored early adolescent behavior to determine if differences in gender development contributed to gender pay inequality. One of the factors associated with the gender pay gap is negotiation skills (Lobel, 2020). Saari et al. studied children between the ages of 12 to 15. The authors explored social development starting at age 11 for children with access to disposable income to determine how children conceptualize negotiation and whether they had any income expectations. They found neither age nor gender affected the absence of wage increase negotiations between the children and their parents.

Some researchers examined gender preferences and attitudes. Bensidoun and Trancart (2018) explored the effects of gender preferences and attitudes on the gender pay gap in France. The researchers felt these factors required more consideration because they determine a person's career path and influence an employer's hiring choices. Oing (2020) did a similar study to ascertain if wage gaps are attributable to male and female cognitive factors and cultural attitudes. Bensidoun and Trancart purported that studies that examine educational and experience differences are no longer sufficient. Studies to explore cognitive factors may explain the remaining pay gap. The results of their research suggest that a significant portion of the remaining pay gap may be attributed to differences in men and women preferences and attitudes.

Objectives of Compensation Plans

The design of a compensation plan could affect many aspects of a business. Ali and Anwar (2021) and Majekodunmi (2019) discussed the difficulties of using a salary payment system to meet company objectives. Ali and Anwar's study focused on the effect of salary systems on company innovation. They argued that business leaders should align salary strategy and company strategy. Thus, pay systems should change as the firm develops in phases. Ali and Anwar argued that a gender wage gap and a sense of injustice could stifle productivity. They found that competitiveness, fairness, and incentive principles drive the compensation design. Ali and Anwar described these principles and explained how members of an organization play a key role in managing an effective compensation system. Majekodunmi (2019) examined the impact of regular salary payments, employee recognitions, employee incentives, allowances paid, and promotions on the employee's perception of job security, opportunities to use skills, and opportunities for promotion. The results of this study also revealed the impact of compensation design on business decisions.

Studies of pay perception offer key information on compensation designs. Majekodunmi (2019) targeted non-academic staff of universities in Lagos State, Nigeria. Majekodunmi found that the results align with previous empirical studies and exploratory research on the impact of compensation factors on employee job satisfaction. Majekodunmi hypothesized that the strategic design of a compensation system does not affect job satisfaction. The researcher found no statistically significant relationship between the listed constructs. The researcher used the equity theory to discuss the

perceived pay disparities between non-academic and academic staff at these universities. According to Majekodunmi, the universities awarded the non-academic staff less than their perceived input. Majekodunmi thoroughly summarized how previous studies supported this theory and how studies, such as those by Shahimi et al. (2019), on the perceived pay satisfaction from the pay structure of hotel employees, challenged the findings.

Pay and Government Regulation Compliance

Government regulations affect many aspects of a business. One of the core business objectives of designing compensation plans is to comply with government regulations (Kagumya, 2020). External factors such as government regulations also influence the overall pay strategy, which represents the company's beliefs regarding compensation decisions (Gerakos et al., 2018).

Researchers have made many recommendations for changing compensation plans. Kagumya (2020) studied compensation strategies to support corporate governance practices in compliance with government regulations issued after the fiscal crisis of 2008. Douglas and Ravenswood (2019) studied the government's gender pay during this period. From 2008 to 2017, government officials in New Zealand insisted that pay equity was not affordable. Officials later changed that sentiment. According to Kagumya, regulated reforms in compensational structures enhance firm performance. Regulators recommended that leaders use compensation committees to oversee transformations.

Equitable Compensation Practices

An equitable compensation plan means pay is fair and impartial. Sandburg (2017) examined the design of the pay system at an organizational level to determine gender-neutral makeup. Acknowledging the importance of wage systems in determining what the author refers to as gender-neutral legitimacy, Sandburg studied standard performance evaluation practices that employers use. Sandburg's project did not find one organization with pay practices that addressed gender pay equality. According to Sandburg, employers use multiple pay systems that are often gender-biased, and employers mask those pay systems with a more formal pay system. Impartiality is usually compromised.

Pay systems are often biased. Sandburg used secondary data from a 2011 study of 18 Finland companies. The researcher focused the primary research questions for the exploratory study on how the pay systems objectified equal pay and how pay systems garner gender inequality. One major issue that Sandburg addressed throughout the findings was the subjectivity of allocating evaluation and performance appraisal points.

Accounting professors have also experienced pay inequity. Wiedman (2020) had results comparable to Ugarte's (2017), with bias and the gender pay gap, in a study of accounting professors at Canadian universities. According to Wiedman, women and men represent the accounting profession equally at entry, but fewer women advance. Wiedman found that the women accounting professors, on average, earned less than the men for their research published in research journals. Also, women accounting professors received less recognition for the research coauthored with men accounting professors.

Universities penalized women with lower rewards for equal work in an environment with gender bias.

Researchers often measure pay perception in wage system studies. Studies like Finn and Lee (1972) focused on determining the effects of pay perception on salary administration. Finn and Lee's findings aligned with Sandburg (2017). Not only did they surmise that employers do not often consider employees' perception of pay in business pay practice, but they also found that pay determination procedures are often random. Finn and Lee drew from the inequity studies by notable theorists, such as the Adams' (1963) study, to determine what influences an employee's perception of pay. They tried to determine what employees perceived to be fair pay.

Early studies on pay equity were similar. In part one of Finn and Lee (1972) study, they did a product-moment correlation matrix of fifty-one variables with salary as dependent variable. The researchers conducted multiple-linear regressions to pinpoint which variables were stronger in determining salary. Finn and Lee observed that employers paid employees who perceived pay inequitable, much less than those who perceived their pay was equitable. There were no logical reasons for the pay difference. The researchers' pay predicting models examined the salary correlation between variables such as education, length of service, and years since the highest degree. However, this was a correlational, not a causal study. The researchers exposed the arbitrary nature of the salary administration process.

Administering a fair and equitable pay system is often as difficult as designing one. Bisset (2017) analyzed the complexities of administering effective and equitable

compensation plans. In the analysis, Bisset used an example of a flexible and transparent remuneration plan for a radiology department at a children's hospital in Texas. The author contended that a compensation plan's most important facet is ensuring employers pay workers what they feel they are worth. Task structure and horizontal labor divisions are also important.

Arguments for and against pay-for-performance systems also influence the design of pay systems. According to Wilmers (2020), a problem occurs when the simplification of job tasks for one coworker makes the job tasks for another coworker unique. This situation yields an unequal pay premium amongst coworkers. Private medical practices lean heavily towards salary systems due to output measurement issues. Also, researchers are critical of pay-for-performance plans because they hinder collaboration. However, Bisset (2017) argued that this only occurs under certain circumstances.

The leaders of the children's hospital in Texas used a simple blended model of flat salary plus a productivity-based pay metric in the radiology department. Employers paid everyone a set base salary when hired, for up to six years, based on post-fellowship work. Employers activate the pay-for-performance point-based system after nine months of employment. The plan worked well for the Texas radiology department. However, some fear that this type of plan may hinder the creativity of those engaged in heuristic thinking (Bisset, 2017). The type of business and work environment may determine if this pay system fits a company's objectives.

Companies have many decision-makers. Bass (1968) used descriptive, correlational statistics to explore the equitable salary discussion from the perspective of

those who make salary decisions. According to Bass, few studies have approached this subject from this angle. Under set budgetary and market constraints, researchers asked participants to determine salary increases for ten engineers with different evaluation scores. Seven of the engineers' names were randomly associated with various non-merit factors, such as lack of job security, poor working conditions, unfriendly coworkers, or uninteresting work, to see if these factors would influence the merit pay awarded. Bass employed a correlational analysis to identify which personal factor most affected salary decisions. The participants awarded smaller pay raises to the more qualified engineers. Interestingly, they paid more based on randomly assigned non-merit, subjective factors than on actual merit scores, highlighting the often subjective nature of pay decision-making.

The findings of another study also highlighted the subjective nature of pay and pay merits. Hinrichs (1969) administered a survey to 1,500 large corporation employees with several locations nationwide. The survey used dollar amounts (ranging from $1 to $1,000) for pay increases to see what employees felt was a small, medium, or large pay increase. Hinrichs further subdivided his data based on the current pay level, education, gender, and age of the employees. The descriptive results were consistent for what constituted a small or average pay increase. However, the results for a significant pay increase were inconsistent across education, gender, age, and current pay level.

Pay system designs for the public sector often differ from those for the private sector. A compensation study by Ljungholm (2015) examined the pay-for-performance systems in the public sector. Ljungholm argued that paying employees the same may lead

to an unfair pay system without adjustments for performance measures. The researcher assessed the process control systems that reward employees for equal production efforts. Ljungholm stressed the importance of all parties ensuring that the process excludes subjective judgments. Subjectivity in merit pay creates dissatisfied employees. Thus, key measurements for wages must be transparent and equitable. Ljungholm defined the use of improper financial stimulus strategies resulting in increased turnover. Performance-related pay equalizes the worker's inputs with outputs. According to Ljungholm, this should also improve business results. Pay systems that reward workers based only on experience may not get the best workers.

Employers often set up operations differently. Ugarte (2017) examined how internal labor market (ILM) dynamics and external labor market (ELM) dynamics affect pay systems and create pay inequities. This study was part of a significant endeavor to explore wage systems and gender pay differentials in Argentina and Chile. Argentina had a strong centralized collective bargaining system that favored unskilled workers, and Chile used a decentralized wage-setting system. Thus, Ugarte used a qualitative approach to compare the inter-country pay practices. Ugarte was concerned with studies by Hinrichs (1969) and Bass (1968) suggesting that management discretion and performance criteria variability caused gender bias in informal, non-transparent pay systems. The researcher chose to perform the study in the banking industry because of the growing number of skilled women workers. Ugarte found that pay increases brokered by Argentina’s central banking union limited the manager’s accountability for linking base pay increases with merit-based pay system evaluations. In Chile, management discretion

influenced pay increases. According to the interview participants in this study, men benefited from these actions far more than women. The results of the decentralized system differed from centralized operations.

The ELM can affect executive pay as well. Quintana-Garcia and Elvira (2017) studied the effects of an external labor compensation structure on gender pay for executives. These are male and female executives for whom the firm does not have internal pay information at hiring or promotion time. Thus, the market plays a significant part. Like Weinstein (2017), Quintana-Garcia and Elvira wanted to explore factors that may explain the cause of the remaining gender pay gap. They used the incomplete information theory, social capital, and the opportunity structure for discrimination framework as the basis of the study.

Compensation for women executives is often lower than for men executives. Quintana-Garcia and Elvira (2017) did an empirical study that indicated that career moves are more compensational beneficial for men than women. They hypothesized that women executives recruited externally would incur a more significant compensation penalty than men recruited externally and larger than internally promoted executives. Their quantitative study revealed that outside hiring had a substantial adverse effect on compensation for female executives. Women executives earned a premium when promoted internally. The researchers attributed gender pay differences to variable pay rewards. They argued that the difference may also be from a woman's failure to assertively negotiate extras in their compensation packages. The researchers also

discussed the possible attribution of the devaluation theory and the perceived diminished value of a woman's work.

Leaders study the entry of women workers into the market often. Weinstein (2017) did a statistical analysis with census data from 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010 on how the increase in the female labor force since 1980 has affected wage growth. The researcher analyzed data from cities in the United States. According to Weinstein, if the increase of women in the workforce is only about the quantity of labor, then wages would decrease due to the crowded market that entered female-dominated occupations with low wages. Weinstein argued that not only does economic growth engineer gender equality, but gender equality also engineers economic growth. Weinstein concluded that a large part of the slow decline in the gender wage gap is due to occupational and industry disparities. Weinstein explained how part of the reduction of the gender pay gap may be due to the increase in female labor in the market.

Compensation for Nursing Profession

Compensation structures for nurses can have a significant impact on the nursing profession. Nursing is an occupation that is composed of 90% female workers with a perceived devalued wage base (Swain, 2019). Women in nursing still earn an average of twelve cents less per dollar than men nurses (Chen et al., 2021; Swain, 2019). Thus, researchers such as Ebert et al. (2016) examined how work conditions affect nursing shortages in Europe when the government regulates pay structures. They specifically looked at factors such as work hours, work timing, and fringe benefits. When employers fix wage structures, other factors impact the retention of qualified nurses (Ebert et al.,

2016). Flexibility, predictability, and work shifts significantly impact nurses leaving the profession.

Other factors can also have an impact on the pay gap for nurses. Muench et al. (2016) examined the gender pay gap in nursing to see if career ambition, experience, having children, or the ability to lift heavy objects could explain it. The researchers posited that human capital differences such as education and experience could explain only part of the differences in female versus male earnings. The researcher did find some correlations between career goals and the wages earned. However, the other tests were inconclusive. Muench et al. discussed the need for both public and private employers to be proactive and examine their pay structures for pay disparities. According to Mandel (2016), employees in an occupation with a large private sector can benefit from the positive effect that the public sector wage structure can have on the wage structure of the private sector.

Researchers conduct pay gap studies by professions globally. Wrohlich and Zucco (2017) addressed the pay gap issue in the German labor market. They hypothesized that the public sector had a smaller gender pay gap than the private sector because of pay transparency. Wrohlich and Zucco compared wage and gender statistics from male-dominated, female-dominated, and mixed-gendered professions. They used the median salary for their statistical measurements to give a less skewed measurement than the average. They found that female-dominated professions had lower median wages than male-dominated professions. The devaluation theory and the theory of compensating differentials were both used in this analysis. Wrohlich and Zucco did not feel that these

theories alone could explain the gender pay gap issue because gender pay gaps exist within occupations, too. They found that median pay negatively correlates with the size of the female workforce, but the gender pay gap does not. After eliminating other factors, the authors concluded that pay transparency is the primary driver in reducing the gender pay gap.

The gender pay gap in nursing also may affect other occupations. Like Wrohlich and Zucco (2017), Combes et al. (2018) examined nursing staff shortage by comparing the pay competitiveness of registered nurses and nursing assistants in English hospitals. The researchers hypothesized that one occupation's pay structure may affect another occupation's staffing. Unlike Wrohlich and Zucco, the researchers simultaneously evaluated the effects of pay competitiveness on the two occupations. The study's findings indicated that uncompetitive pay in the registered nursing occupation could negatively affect the recruitment of nursing assistants. Combes et al. posited that uncompetitive pay for registered nurses could result in fewer staffed registered nurses and a more significant workload for nursing assistants. Also, employers cannot motivate nursing assistants to take a position at a hospital with uncompetitive pay for nurses because of the lack of potential pay should they advance in position (Combes et al., 2018). In this quantitative study, the researchers used the private hospital group's pay system to standardize the region's pay elements. They compared that standardized rate with the national rate used in the public hospital group to determine the public sector pay gap.

Transition

Section 1 included the problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, significance of the study, and a literature review with a focus on the gender pay gap, occupational wage devaluation theory, and equity theory as a means to understand how strategies to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines could lead to positive social change. Section 2 includes a discussion of my role as the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical considerations, data collection, organization techniques, and data analysis. Section 3 includes a presentation of findings, applications to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, suggestions for further research, reflections, and a conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

The intent of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines. Section 2 includes a restatement of the purpose statement, my role as the researcher, participants, method and design, population, and sampling. The section also includes information on ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection techniques, organization, and analysis. I address reliability and validity of the study followed by a summary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines. The target population was four nursing healthcare and human resource leaders from four private nonprofit hospitals in the United States, which comply with state equal pay regulations. The study has implications for positive social change because strategies to standardize wages and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines could level competition for nurses, thereby making it easier for leaders of healthcare facilities to use resources to find and retain experienced nurses to provide improved caregiving services to patients.

Role of the Researcher

I had a primary role in the study. The role of the researcher is to function as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis and maintain strict adherence to ethical guidelines (Tedersoo et al., 2021). As the researcher, I developed the interview

protocol, conducted interviews, and collected, organized, and interpreted data. Moreover, I strove to understand, assess, and determine the value of participant responses. My role as a researcher was to establish validity of my research on strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines.

The Belmont Report contains fundamental ethical principles researchers should abide by when researching human subjects. These principles include safeguarding the respect of vulnerable populations, avoiding deceptiveness, and uniform handling for all participants (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). To adhere to the Belmont Report protocol, I followed ethical standards and guidelines for protecting participants. I adhered to ethical principles outlined in the Report and used the standard interview protocol for all interviews as outlined in the report.

To mitigate bias during the research process, I relied on empirical evidence from previous studies as evidential support for gender wage disparities in female-dominated occupations. The primary means of collecting data was interviewing participants. I requested interviews via email and social media with experienced human resources and nursing managers at private nonprofit hospitals in the United States.

Principles of data collection help guide case studies. Yin (2018) explained the principles of data collection are essential to developing reliable case studies with multiple evidential support. These principles include using triangular sources of evidence, creating a case study database for organizational purposes, maintaining a chain of evidence, and exercising care with social media sources. Researchers use many sources of evidence for

case studies, including documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2018). According to Yin, all sources have advantages and disadvantages; however, multiple sources are more likely to cover varying perspectives of the problem. Many sources of data complement each other.

Researchers often triangulate research methods and designs. They also frequently consider using multiple theories, data sources, methodologies, and investigator. According to Busetto et al. (2020), methodological triangulation or mixed methods approaches can help overcome shortcomings of one singular study method.

I supplemented interviews with data from the EEOC for my study. This helped to avoid researcher bias. Researchers gain more data using multiple methods of collection (Yin, 2018). Some participants prefer to report information via paper questionnaires, while others are more comfortable sharing information about their profession through interviews. The goal is to get clear and precise information from participants.

Researchers have many obligations when dealing with participants. The teleological philosophical view involves the preconceived notion that researchers will not engage in unethical decisions or acts that result in negative consequences (Saunders et al., 2015). Researchers must evaluate ethical boundaries of quantitative techniques and use valid and reliable measures to prevent negative consequences.

Each stage of the research process presents different challenges. During each stage of the process, to ensure reliable and ethical work, researchers must think of consequences of unethical actions (Saunders et al., 2015). They should not emotionally select data or use results that do not reflect anticipated outcomes. During each project

phase, researchers should consider adverse effects of altered findings and ensure replicability for future research (Saunders et al., 2015). One way to do this is to promote transparency during every process phase as well as proper training (Head, 2020). Another method is to have someone else separately analyze researcher data to ensure data measurements are valid and findings are reasonable. To protect data from subjectivity, researchers use secondary data for anonymity (Lim, 2024).

Bias in research is unavoidable and can occur at any point during the research process. Bias negatively impacts study validity (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Being a female researcher could pose an issue with bias. AS a female in the female-dominated accounting profession, I am especially sensitive to this phenomenon since empirical evidence from prior studies has shown negative correlations between wages and the ratio of female to male workers by occupation.

Adequately defining one's study help researchers stay focused on research and gather all data to cover the topic thoroughly. Yin (2018) suggested that researchers use member checks to help interpret data.

Dejonckheere and Vaughn (2019) advised transparency during the research process. Before beginning the study, publicly noting research philosophies and preconceived prejudices could lead to exposing researcher bias. Lees et al. (2022) stated two techniques for mitigating bias are pilot studies and interviewing interviewers. Pilot studies are small-scale studies that are done for practice, and interviewing interviewers is when researchers allow someone else to interview them. Both suggestions are methods for training novice researchers to reduce bias during the data collection phases.

Researchers must also be careful during the interview process. Both Lees et al. (2022) and Busetto et al. (2020) suggested ways to reduce bias during interviews. In addition to member checking, which allows participants to review and verify the researcher's interpretation of their input, Lees stressed the importance of open-ended questions for obtaining participant input. Busetto et al. explained how yes or no questions can be suggestive and leading. A yes or no question does not give the interviewee a chance to offer another possibility.

During the research study, I used these research suggestions to limit the unavoidable occurrences of biases, assumptions, and attitudes. I chose to study in an occupational field I have not worked in. I rigorously prepared my interview questions to avoid the potential of using yes or no follow-up questions.

Participants

A strategic plan to manage the challenges of interviewing participants could be valuable to a researcher. Two such challenges are participant reluctance to answer questions and participant dropouts. The former is common in qualitative studies of sensitive topics (Giorgi, 2021). One strategy for managing this situation is to allow the participant to set the time and place for the interview. The participant may want to have the interview in a familiar setting, and the participant may feel more comfortable conferencing via phone or computer (Giorgi, 2021). Allowing the participants some control over how, when, and where the interview occurs may make them more comfortable sharing information.

The other possible threat to conducting interviews for qualitative studies is the possibility of participants canceling the interview. Explaining the study's nature and importance could reduce this likelihood (Saunders et al., 2015). A researcher should also line up backup participants as well.

I contacted experienced human resources and nursing managers from private non-profit hospitals in the United States with access to payroll information. I sought participants from qualifying hospitals who used strategies to mitigate equal pay regulatory fines. After assessing qualifications, I invited healthcare leaders to participate. I sent invitations via emails and social media, highlighting the study's goal. Then, I followed up with phone calls. I sent consent forms to interested participants to confirm their eligibility and explain participant rights. Each participant’s consent form explained that participation is voluntary. Additionally, I informed each participant that their identity would remain confidential. It took months to find qualified participants who were willing and able to participate. I worked around scheduling conflicts due to time zones differences and each interview was insightful. I conducted sought and conducted semistructured interviews until data saturation.

Research Method and Design

This qualitative, multiple case study focused on healthcare leaders' strategies to standardize nurses' pay and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines. Using a multiple qualitative explorative case study research method and design allowed me to obtain the necessary information in alignment with the purpose of this study. This section includes a review of standard research methods and designs.

Research Method

Quantitative and qualitative research studies are two well-known research study methods. Management research veered from the traditional positivist quantitative to the realist qualitative method (Coleman, 2021). Qualitative studies are not as structured as the quantitative method. This format allows the researcher to do interviews with open-ended questions. The realist method is particularly helpful in areas where researchers do not fully understand the situation, and the case study design is most prevalent (Coleman, 2021).

Since case study research is more subjective, trustworthiness is a crucial component. Trustworthiness leads to a study with utmost usability (Subedi, 2023). Trustworthiness means full transparency. Structuring the study according to the guidelines set forth by experienced researchers, I applied techniques for reliability and validity, such as evaluating my study's descriptive value for its replication ability.

Some features of qualitative studies are different from quantitative studies. One feature unique to qualitative studies is interview question data (Saunders et al., 2015). Interview questions are often essential to gathering data for analysis. Another key feature of qualitative studies is the use of inductive reasoning to develop a conceptual framework (Saunders et al., 2015). A conceptual framework is the researcher's guide for conducting the study (Mensah et al., 2020). The researcher builds upon the theoretical concept, but the conceptual framework explains how the information will flow throughout the study.

For quantitative studies, the positivist philosophy surmises what you can see and what you can measure **(**Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Positivists use existing theories to

develop research questions and hypotheses. These hypotheses typically identify concrete variables for testing (Saunders et al., 2015). These variables are essential in ensuring that a research study proposal is clear and concise to the reader. These variables also ensure that the research problem, purpose statement, theoretical framework, research questions, and hypotheses align with the research study's goal (Saunders et al., 2015). This study did not involve the measurement of variables. Therefore, the qualitative method was appropriate.

Research Design

Phenomenological and case study research designs are two standard qualitative research designs. A researcher uses phenomenological research design to explore areas with little to no research (Shorey & Ng, 2022). Researchers interview participants to gather a clear understanding of their perceptions of events lived (Bartholomew et al., 2021). A case study design features a problem in a specific setting (Saunders et al., 2015). Therefore, the interviewer is not concerned with the participants' perceptions of lived events but rather their knowledge of the processes within the bounded setting.

The phenomenological research design sets the standard for data collection time and method. A researcher collects almost all data in phenomenological studies from participant interviews (Daud et al., 2024; Shorey & Ng, 2022). For the study to be attractive to business professionals, the participant pool should be large (Bartholomew et al., 2021).

The case study design offers some similarities and differences to the phenomenological design. The case study design also includes participant interviews;

however, the pool is smaller (Bartholomew et al., 2021). Case studies also utilize secondary data collection techniques such as questionnaires or company data (Quintao et al., 2020). Consequently, there are many benefits to using case study research method. The most significant benefit may be applying knowledge gained in one setting to the same issue in another (Yin, 2018). A multiple case study design enables practitioners to use findings from private general or specialty hospital settings and apply them to their organization.

Neither the ethnography nor narrative inquiry was an appropriate design for this study of strategies that healthcare leaders utilize to standardize nurses' pay and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines. A narrative research design centers around a story with a specific order of events (Bartholomew et al., 2021). The ethnographic design requires the researcher's involvement. The researcher develops a close relationship with the participants and usually observes their actions for an extended period within a cultural setting (Saunders et al., 2015). This study did not focus on actions of participants. I gathered work-related information from business records and participant interviews. The research questions did not require a narrative of human actions. Thus, the narrative inquiry and ethnography designs were not more suitable than the case study design for this study of strategies used by nursing healthcare and human resources leaders to standardize nurses' pay and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines.

Population and Sampling

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate

costs of equal pay regulatory fines. This multiple case study involved both private non-profit general and specialty hospital systems. Nursing leaders and human resource professionals know the hiring, performance review, and performance pay process of the nursing staff in hospitals. They have information on the hospital policies that address equal pay regulations. I interviewed participants until the data saturated..

Successfully delineating target population is helpful for many reasons. It process helps a researcher further define their research topic for the reader (Saunders et al., 2015). This could also help to identify any vulnerabilities (Negrin et al., 2022). Age, race, ethnicity and medical disorders are common vulnerabilities that may raise concerns. This research study involved confidential pay information, leaving certain racial or subordinate groups vulnerable to manipulation or ridicule. With defined gender-specific statistics involved, an institutional review board (IRB) requires a researcher to take extra cautionary steps to protect individuals' anonymity (Onakomaiya et al., 2023).

Ethical Research

Research for a study sometimes requires access to sensitive information. Ethics review boards expect researchers to uphold an ethical standard of conduct to protect that information so that the researchers do not harm vulnerable subjects (Saunders et al., 2015). Third parties may review a researcher’s tasks for collecting, storing, and using confidential information. Thus, before beginning any research project, an analysis of the target population, which includes ethical considerations for the target population and the impact of those ethical considerations on the value of the study, is helpful.

Researchers must give special ethical considerations to specific groups of study due to the significant impact they can have on research results. Indeed, it can be challenging to get access to information (Saunders et al., 2015). Participants may not be willing to engage in written communication in the form of emails or questionnaires, which would require extra security. Pay transparency is not common in most industries, however, preexisting contacts helped relay the importance of my study to the company's overall health and profitability which made leaders willing to participate in interviews (Saunders et al., 2015).

After I obtained the required authorization (08-28-23-0636830) from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I informed all participants of the nature of the study. I asked each to sign consent forms acknowledging their understanding of the study's ramifications. I informed each participant of all the risks and benefits of the research and that the interview would be audio-recorded for accuracy. I interviewed only those willing and qualified to participate. I notified them that their name and identifying information would remain confidential and that they had the right to withdraw from the study if they wished.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the interviewer and this study's primary data collection instrument. My interview questions were open-ended questions optimal for data collection. I used interview questions that focused on information related to the study's research question: what strategies do nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines? I also secured data from the

Healthcare Nursing and Human Resources Associations and data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Methodological triangulation using multiple data collection methods assists researchers in data analysis and study validity (Farquhar et al., 2020). Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions inspire participants to freely express their experiences and details on a study topic (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I used member checking to improve transcription accuracy because, according to Motulsky (2021), member checking to confirm the researcher's interpretation of participant responses boosts study reliability. Furthermore, Yin (2018) supported using qualitative and quantitative data sources for case studies. Thus, along with member-checked interview responses, the structured and statistical data I collected further boost the study's validity.

Data Collection Technique

According to Dejonckheere and Vaughn (2019), most qualitative studies are exploratory. The purpose of one study is not to solve all world problems. It could simply be a step forward, prompting further research (Saunders et al., 2015). The pre-work for an interview is crucial to the success of the interview. Dejonckheere and Vaughn emphasized that a written interview protocol is part of that prep. Depending on the participant's background, a more detailed interview protocol that includes a literature review and the planned interview questions may set the stage for the conversation by providing useful background information. Therefore, more time spent preparing for the interview may be the key to having an informative research study.

Interviews, EEOC publications, and hospital data on public domains, were the primary sources for this study. I performed interviews by phone and Zoom as requested by the interviewee. I obtained consent forms from each interviewee with authorization to record the interviews. Interviews are an excellent data source for qualitative studies because they allow researchers to conduct exploratory research. Exploratory research examines the research problem from many different angles (Kniess & Walker-Donnelly, 2022; Saunders et al., 2015). The participants are experts, and through semi-structured interviews, they can provide detailed information (Kniess & Walker-Donnelly, 2022). Member checking ensured the researcher's interpretation of those interviews was reliable and valid (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018).

Documents from state and federal regulatory agencies regarding pay equality revealed hospital pay practices. These pay practices are essential to the research question of this study on strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines. Thus, I will keep all physical and electronic documents locked and stored for 5 years and then destroy them.

Data Organization Technique

I used a password-protected Excel spreadsheet to track participant information under aliases. I password-protected research documents, interview dates, interview locations, consent forms, e-mails, and research notes. Some researchers advocate for open access and secondary analysis of qualitative research data (Cheong et al., 2023; Jain, 2021; Kelly et al., 2024; Mozersky et al., 2020). However, Tedersoo et al. (2021) stressed that there may be ethical issues with this process. Thus, I followed advocates'

guidelines on safely storing and locking away all research documents and computer thumb drives (Khan & MacEachen, 2022). I assigned each participant a pseudonym to protect their identity. I loaded member-checked transcripts and state information into the data analysis software NVivo14 to help organize data for coding.

Data Analysis

There is no one perfect method for analyzing qualitative research data. A theoretical foundation supports an orderly method used in unison with other methods of data analysis and data collection techniques, such as member checking (Raskind et al., 2019). A researcher's initial attraction to a particular method of data analysis typically hinges on that researcher's philosophical research style (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). Summarizing a researcher's justification for chosen data analysis techniques is extremely helpful in integrating elements into a proper study.

To not compromise the validity and trustworthiness of my study, I based my data analysis selection on the nature of the overarching research question of what strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines. Domain analysis helped me isolate the main tools affecting wage valuation and enabled me to construct follow-up questions (Raskind et al., 2019). The codes helped me deduce themes guided by the occupation wage devaluation and equity theory.

This data analysis process helped me follow a multi-step process used by researchers. Yin (2018) defined this 5-phase cycle as assembling the data in order, breaking it into smaller segments, reassembling it into meaningful, coded groups,

forming an explanation of the data, and then forming conclusions. Multiple data sources, such as interviews and government agency website statistics, were used to define the domains. I compared the emerging themes to findings from the literature review and to the conceptual framework. Having reliable and verifiable data is the key to having a proper study that focuses on the phenomenon's how and why (Raskind et al., 2019). This well-structured data analysis process extracted that data.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are two important concepts. For accountants, audited financials are only as good as the quality of data and analysis that ensues. The concepts of reliability and validity are equally imperative to a researcher's work. If the validity and reliability of a study are questionable, then the study's transferability becomes impossible (Saunders et al., 2015). The research study will be questionable.

Reliability

Many things may alter or hinder data quality or collection. Distractions to the participant, participant or researcher bias, and even human error can significantly affect data in research studies. Qualitative case studies use data from a small participant pool (Saunders et al., 2015). Thus, any slight error or threat in these areas can significantly impact the final synthesis for reporting.

Reliability is strongly related to the dependability of the data. Member checking and testing the interview protocol are two critical steps I took to ensure data dependability in the study. Choosing experts in the field of study is also a way to improve study dependability and help achieve data saturation (Yin, 2018). I targeted nursing and

human resource leaders with knowledge of the nursing compensation system. I also practiced my interview questions beforehand to ensure that the questions were understandable and insightful.

Validity

Reliability and validity are essential for many reasons. Yazan (2015) noted that both reliability and validity should be the center of not only data collection but also data analysis. Qualitative researchers use the same open-ended questions with all strategically chosen participants to support a study's validity (Merriam et al., 2020). Yin (2018) equated case study validity with source triangulation, evidential chains, and member checking. Analytical pattern matching and data saturation help assure internal and external validity, while reliability is enhanced by following set procedures. Analytical pattern matching and data saturation improve the research credibility and transferability of the study (Saunders et al., 2015). Although replication is not simple and is often challenging to achieve, especially in qualitative studies (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021), confirmability and transferability are obtainable in a valid and trustworthy case study. Future researchers will find this helpful.

I ensured confirmability by ensuring the interview questions aligned with the study's central research question. To ensure readers and future researchers can transfer the findings, I provided an accurate study description through meticulous research process documentation, adhering to an interview protocol, and maintaining a reflective journal as recommended by Tuval-Mashiach (2021). A multiple case study with member checking is more verifiable and replicable than a single case study (Quintao et al., 2020).

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included a detailed discussion of the project. After addressing the foundation of the study and primary literature, I highlighted my significant role as the researcher as well as participants in this study. I assessed inherent researcher bias and participant selection study. I also addressed study accountability and integrity. Section 3 includes research findings and their applications to practice. It also contains results of data analysis.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

In Section 3, I describe findings from this exploratory study of strategies healthcare leaders use to standardize nursing wages. I address emergent themes from data and present them as well as the conceptual framework. In addition to findings from this study, Section 3 also includes applications to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and a conclusion.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines. The overarching research question was: What strategies do nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate the costs of equal pay regulatory fines? I gathered data on equal pay regulatory policies and hospital infractions from the EEOC and state agencies. I also gathered information from semi-structured interviews with four human resource healthcare leaders. I did the forth interview to make sure data was saturated.

The study included one human resources director, one human resources consultant, one chief human resources officer, and one executive vice president/chief human resources officer from multistate general and specialty nonprofit hospitals in Texas, Indiana, Montana, and New York. I used purposeful sampling and extended social media invites to each participant. Before I conducted the interviews, each participant signed an informed consent form issued by the IRB. They each consented to audio-recorded interviews and answered nine semi-structured interview questions via phone or

Zoom calls. The average interview time was 35 minutes. To protect the interviewee's privacy, I assigned pseudonyms to each: P1, P2, P3, and P4.

Interviewees were experienced and knowledgeable in the healthcare field (see Table 1). I used nine interview and follow-up questions to gather information from participants on their experiences with standardizing nursing wages to mitigate equal pay regulatory fines. I transcribed each interview after I finished audio-recorded sessions. I then wrote a summary of all sessions to use for member checking.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Title	Experience	Type of Facility	States
1	HR Director	25	Inpatient/Out Rehab Hospital System	TX, CO, LA, FL, OK
2	CHRO	35	Long-term/Assisted Living	IN
3	HR Consultant	12	Inpatient/Out Healthcare System	MT, CA, WA, OR
4	CHRO/EVP	25	Inpatient/Out Healthcare System	NY

Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO)
Executive Vice President (EVP)

Researchers have many ways to validate and ensure credibility of data in qualitative research studies. Member checking is a way for interviewers to verify interpretations of participant responses. Since participants in this study were highly qualified professionals with 12 to 35 years of experience in healthcare human resources, I asked them to provide input on findings. I provided each participant with a draft of the findings section to review and clarify information from interviews. This form of member checking is more structured and provides more meaningful feedback to researchers

(McKim, 2023). After receiving feedback from participants, I began formally analyzing data.

I started my data analysis by reading through all interview transcripts and slowly reading each transcription separately. I used Microsoft Excel to analyze data, and I used vivo codes via NVivo 14 to ensure validity of data analysis. Codes are terms participants directly used involving Adams' equity and occupational wage devaluation theories. Codes resulted in the following three overarching themes and subthemes relating to strategies to standardize nurse wages and mitigate costs of regulatory pay business fines: challenges to implementation of standardization strategies, including constant market changes due to a shortage of nurses, lack of leadership support, lack of employee engagement, and lack of strategic planning or crisis planning, strategies for standardizing pay structure, which includes shared services, a defined pay philosophy, and transparency, and respect for the nursing profession (see Table 2). Findings and association for each theme as well as literature and the conceptual framework are addressed in this section.

Table 2

Semi-Structured Interview Findings: Themes

Participant	Theme (Challenges)	Theme (Strategies)	Theme (Respect)
1	Yes	Yes	
2	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Yes	Yes	
4	Yes	Yes	Yes

Theme 1: Challenges of Implementing Standardization Strategies

The first theme was challenges with implementing standardization strategies. All four participants encountered issues involving executing wage standardization strategies for nurses. The top four categorical challenges were constant market changes and nurse shortages, leadership support, employee engagement, and strategic business planning.

Market Changes and Nurse Shortages

Nurses are a significant staffing need in the healthcare industry. P1 noted the constant nursing shortage throughout his years of experience in healthcare human resources. He stated, “When I entered healthcare 20-some years ago, there was a national shortage of nurses. And so that is one of the things I must keep in the forefront: the availability of nurses and the number of people entering nursing school. And this is still a challenge.” P1 further conveyed leaders must consistently review market demands. He works with nursing schools and provides opportunities for students to do rounds at his employer’s facilities.

Market conditions often affect pay ranges for nurses, and compensation leaders adjust those pay ranges in response to market changes. Thus, hospital leaders frequently use third-party vendors and compensation surveys to compile market wage data for pay range adjustments (Bradley, 2021). Variables such as type of work experience, length of work experience, work hours, and locality can make the process arduous. Healthcare leaders often change pay structures when the demand for nurses goes far beyond the supply (Bradley, 2021). P3 said for their non-represented nursing staff, “We conduct a yearly market wage analysis for them and others to ensure that their wages keep up with

market value. So, if we have priced a job too low for any number of reasons, that's an opportunity for that job or that job at that location to be brought up to market wage". P2 conveyed they participated in a salary survey through the LeadingAge Association that involved long-term care facilities. The survey is specified by region, state, number of beds, and revenue. According to P2:

> They look at the ranges several different ways, and then we usually take that information and average it. Now, sometimes, if we're in a tough market, we might say, ok, we've got to go above this above what this is saying. And so, at that point, we would make an adjustment to the pay range specific to that campus. But again, it's still going to have that structure where we're paying everyone who has three years of experience the same dollar amount.

P2 also stated sometimes adjustments to the pay range are made multiple times during the year because "the wages in the industry are moving so fast." According to her, those wage adjustments may be costly to the hospital, but the cost of using staffing agencies is far higher. P1 concluded multiple pay ranges a year might seem aggressive, but "the market dictates that you have to look at that analysis a little frequently." Study findings indicate leaders often make pay rate changes due to market changes.

P1 discussed the process used to analyze market conditions and challenges faced in the competitive nursing field. P1 explained how difficult it was to define the geographical area to examine. He often compared market wages for the area near his facilities to those in the market one to two hours away. According to him, some nurses travel one to two hours to work. P1 also stated that facility leaders from acute care,

trauma emergency rooms, rehab, and behavioral health would compete for those nurses with trauma experience who are highly skilled at making critical decisions. The pace in a rehab facility is often slower; thus, the pay scale would not be comparable to one in acute care facilities.

COVID-19 was also a challenge to market analysis. P3 stated, “Especially during COVID, we had a series of what I think would be very high sign-on bonuses for nurses, especially in specialties that were hard to staff, like labor and delivery.” P3 concurred with P1. The nursing specialty plays a major part in market wages during a crisis.

Leadership Support

Stakeholder support is crucial to the successful implementation of pay strategies. Key stakeholders include not only the board of directors but also front-line managers. Managers interact with the employees the most, directly relay information to and from them. Employees may pressure them to disregard the pay structure (Phan-Armaneous, 2022). Managers should train employees to objectively adhere to pay strategies and report any abnormalities to the compensation team for quick review. P2 shared information on a manager’s role in standardizing pay. P2 stated:

> Yeah, we, you know, sometimes we will have, you know, campuses that will tell us. Well, I'm not able to hire anyone. The rate is too low, and that's why we have to ask specific questions. So, if they call and say I have a nurse making $35.00 an hour, our pay scale will only pay her $30.00 an hour. Then what I ask is, OK, well, what is that person doing right now? Oh well, she's a DON (Director of Nursing) or ADON (Assistant Director of Nursing). Well, our pay scale for nurses

> is for nurses. It's not for someone who's in a leadership position, so our wages are not going to be competitive with someone who's a DON on campus. So that's where we must help our managers understand that we must look at apples to apples, not apples and oranges. What are the facts? And so, if we don't? If you don't ask the right questions, we can change our pay ranges when we aren't having trouble finding a standard nurse. We were getting reports that a management person wanted to keep their management rate going to a staff position.

P4 stressed the importance of her role as an officer in the hospital:

> Because I am the subject matter expert, my board, my CEO, and my other chiefs look to me as the expert to ensure that I cover what needs to be covered from fiduciary and regulatory responsibilities.

The complete buy-in of the board will provide nursing and HR leaders with the resources needed to complete all strategic goals. Leaders design a pay study and build a strong foundation for the pay strategies but lose momentum without the board's support to move the process along. P4 advised that the board and the senior leadership must be engaged and schooled on the implications of pay equity strategies. Those strategies must align with the organization's overall strategy because implementing those pay study strategies will require much input and effort from all parties. Most importantly, the why of the pay equity studies must be more than "just because it's regulatory."

Employee Engagement

Employees are also major stakeholders in a company. Allow employees to participate in policymaking. Bradley (2021) states nurses often do not understand their

employer's pay structure. The goal is to ensure employees are fully engaged and familiar with pay policies and procedures. Employees should be allowed to freely and unequivocally report any known violations in the workplace without fear of retaliation. Employee feedback will enable leaders to develop and implement wage standardization strategies successfully.

The findings from the study indicate that healthcare nursing HR leaders use various methods to encourage employee participation. P3 utilizes an annual engagement survey of wellness questions measuring an employee's perception of their wages and intent to leave. Leaders gauge the effectiveness of their benefit and wage strategies to determine what areas need help. P1 also does a survey to look at turnover and pay on a semi-annual basis. In analyzing the data, the leaders look at gender statistics to measure pay equity. Employers can use employee feedback to gauge their pay policy effectiveness at providing pay equity.

Educating employees on company pay guidelines has benefits. Informed employees are more likely to collaborate with their employers before filing complaints (Swain, 2019). P2 revealed that leaders try to educate employees on the importance of a pay structure, which often makes recruiting nurses challenging. However, leaders are confident that nurses do not accept a position only for the wage. The organization also has a culture with a low nurse-to-resident ratio, which attracts candidates. P4 lets candidates know company pay policies are fully transparent, and leaders correct any errors in implementing pay equity strategies.

Employers must inform employees of how a crisis climate could affect the pay structure. P3 described how the basics of hazard pay during the COVID-19 pandemic were difficult to communicate. The hospital received federal funding to help but had difficulty formulating and showing how incentive payments would impact employees' pay on paper.

Communicating with the employee base is paramount to developing and implementing successful pay strategies. According to P4, leaders must express care about families and how pay fairly represents the employee's worth. Leaders must do so not as a mindless exercise but because it is fundamentally correct. Employees must feel that sentiment.

Employers could maintain a direct relationship with knowledgeable employees. Employees informed of how employers match outputs to inputs are less likely to encounter gender wage disparities (Bennedsen et al., 2023). Adams' equity theory proponents argue that peer comparisons can help improve pay equity. P3 stated that non-represented nurses sometime compare their wages to those of the unionized contracted nurses. Consequently, leaders increase the wages of non-union groups when they increase the wages of unionized groups. Leaders do this to keep wages equitable and maintain a direct relationship with employees with no third-party representation.

Strategic Business Planning

Planning helps leaders gain awareness of corporate needs for success. Compensation strategy supports the needs of the nursing staff and contributes to the organization's sustainability (Bradley, 2021). The principles of the organization should

guide the development of compensation strategy. According to P4, pay equity is not just a regulatory issue. There needs to be an atmosphere of transparency in the organization. To be successful, pay equity strategy must be part of the overall strategic plan of your organization.

Leaders formulate a successful pay strategy to meet the needs of business. A long-term or rehab facility's budget and financial needs will differ from those of an acute care hospital center. P1 noted that the pay in the rehab setting is not as high as that in the trauma emergency room. Rehab settings do not receive as much Medicaid or Medicare reimbursement. The case mix index (CMI) rate is not as high. P2 also agreed. Long-term care facilities also receive less reimbursement. Lower CMI affects the pay ranges of specialty facilities compared to trauma hospitals. So, leaders of these facilities adjust their strategic goals and pay strategy to reflect these differences.

Strategic crisis management also affects pay equity strategy. The demand for nurses amassed record levels during the COVID-19 crisis, and employers paid steep premiums to compete (Bradley, 2021). Strategic planning for crisis management could help alleviate the strains from nurse shortages. Each participant agreed that COVID-19 significantly impacted their operations and finding qualified nurses was challenging.

Ties to Conceptual Framework

The key objective of compensation planning is to create a design that leaders can use to pay workers what they feel they are worth (Bisset, 2017). The equity theory is the basis of measuring the inputs or work of workers to determine if managers have equally distributed outputs or wages. While the occupational wage theory contends that worker

wages go down as the proportion of women workers becomes a majority in an occupation. These two theories worked well together for this study in a predominantly female occupation.

Each participant revealed that administering a fair and equitable pay system for nurses to mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines is challenging. Inuwa (2017) found that employees associate intelligence levels, education, training, skills, and experience with worker inputs. However, leaders find that measuring those inputs with fair and equitable pay, according to the equity theory and occupational wage devaluation theory, is difficult in a market that is constantly changing due to a shortage of nurses, poor strategic planning, a lack of leadership support, and a lack of employee feedback. The participants stated that leaders often do multiple market analysis reviews yearly to keep wages attractive for the occupation. Experience, education, and certification skills are the main factors that guide pay decisions. Each participant expressed confidence that their organization is putting forth a good-faith effort to bring leadership and employees together to create an equitable pay system for nurses that complies with equal pay regulations.

Ties to the Literature

P3 and P4 indicated that a key to implementing wage standardization strategy is support of not only the board and leadership but also the understanding of the employee. P1, P2, and P4 also agreed that the company leaders must use a pay system that strategically fits their organization's specialty in the healthcare industry. That sentiment is consistent with existing research on how business leaders align salary strategy with

company strategy because perceived pay inequity could affect productivity (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Every participant stressed the importance of market reviews, and Lobel (2020) argued that equal pay regulations create wage adjustments by increasing market information.

Theme 2: Strategies for Standardizing a Pay Structure

The second theme from the data analysis is strategies for standardizing a pay structure. All participants expressed how important it is to establish and publish a set of factors such as length of experience, field of nursing experience, and education to determine nurses' wages. This set of factors establishes the foundation of the compensation structure and builds consistency for the entire organization. Thus, three top strategies for this category are shared services, defined pay philosophies, and transparency.

Shared Services

Multi-hospital systems often share staffing pools across departments via an integration approach of merged educational standards, job descriptions, job codes, and pay practices. An entity-wide pay structure, or what Bradley (2021) refers to as a centralized administration of compensation practices, is necessary to share staffing pools. In a centralized system, leaders can prevent new hire pay offerings that exceed those of seasoned staff members with the same qualifications and length of experience. Thus, work output remains evenly distributed with work inputs.

P3 described what she saw happen with mergers and acquisitions. The leaders of acquisitions tend to make their own wage decisions completely autonomously. So, she

and her team established shared service functions for human resources. These shared services included a corporate compensation team to help price new job codes and do wage assessments. Compensation professionals are knowledgeable of employment law and regulations, and they typically complete tasks such as processing pay adjustments, conducting data and system audits, and conducting pay equity audits.

According to P3, the corporate payroll and project management functions support the compensation and local human resources teams within the multi-hospital system at each facility. The project management professionals were pivotal in planning and implementing the standardized pay structure. The changes for P3 took years of planning, with small workgroups of project management professionals collaborating closely with the staff at each location to guide the process and minimize the differences at each location.

P1, P3, and P4 all advocated for using internal or external teams to lead the pay review process. P1 stated that they have an in-house compensation department to oversee compensation design. P1, P3, and P4 each advocated for consultants or compensation analysts to help create the organization's pay structure, perform market analysis to anticipate pending changes, and regularly perform equitability studies.

State and federal regulators favor internal pay equity studies and reviews. Leaders perform internal pay equity studies as a good-faith effort to discover and resolve disparities quickly. Leaders use pay equity studies as a tool for pay equity law compliance. Regulators in states such as Massachusetts and Oregon support voluntary self-audits done in good faith and used to eliminate wage differentials. Such procedures

can support defense strategy in an equal pay law claim (L&E Global Alliance of Employers' Counsel Worldwide, 2024). Such procedures could help mitigate costs of any potential fines and penalties.

P4 advocated for use of outside consultants who can remain objective. She encountered issues like P3. Their system grew rapidly, and there was no consensus on pay practices. There were no consistent differences between acute care and inventory regarding job descriptions and hiring nurses. The market pay changed for long-term care nurses versus ambulatory care nurses since COVID-19. Their teams are trying to define differences in pay in this post-COVID era. Outside consultants can offer suggestions for modifying their system for consistency.

Defined Pay Philosophies

Employers use pay philosophy as the foundation of the compensation structure. A defined pay philosophy is a vision statement of a company's compensation plan (Agbo et al., 2023). P4 advised that building pay strategy starts with a pay philosophy shared by all stakeholders. According to P4, the pay philosophy and structure are the foundations employers develop for implementing pay equity strategies. P4 also expressed that philosophy means that the compensation structure is united. There must be a consistent way of paying people and a consistent structure.

The pay structure and procedures must be dependable and consistent. Most hospital systems are multi-state systems and strategically administer equal pay compliance policies interstate. Some states have more progressive state laws than others.

Following the same guidelines across state lines for multi-state hospital systems is a means to achieve consistency and support the organization's sole pay philosophy.

P3 reflected on how hospital growth affected the organization's standardization plans. According to P3, most healthcare organizations grow through acquisitions. In her hospital system, she observed several operational differences among affiliates. So, leaders set a foundation with a pay philosophy and structure before consistently applying pay standardization strategies in these locations.

P3 also described how leaders establish the foundation in a multi-state setting. The leaders in her organization include the wage range in all job postings, whether the posting is in a state that requires it or not. That is standard for every location and every area. P3 described the differences in the pay philosophy for nurses by stating:

> We delineate our nursing employees as either, you know, represented or non-represented, so obviously, our represented nurses' wages have already been negotiated through the terms of a collective bargaining agreement. All have, not all, but most have a negotiated agreement. And I understand that the bargained wage structures that in and of themselves avoid help avoid those equal pay regulatory fines. It is highly prescriptive in terms of wage amounts. It is non-negotiable. You hire at a certain wage; if you do not like it, that is all we can do. We must hire based on the agreement. For our non-represented nursing staff, we offer wages based on experience. Hence, it's a part of our offer workbook process that when we calculate what wage we're willing to offer, it's with an equity comparison with the current employees in mind.

According to P4, you build that philosophy and implement what that pay philosophy and wage structure reveal. Employers may need to study factors like gender, seniority, ethnicity, and race. P4 also shared that leaders lay the foundation to prepare for pay equity studies when mergers happen and the system development is still in the early or infancy stages.

Transparency

Transparency is more than pay transparency. Transparency is full awareness of pay practices. Transparency can refer to pay transparency, performance metrics transparency, and pay strategy transparency (Montag-Smith & Smit, 2021). Employers could strategically maneuver transparency to create a competitive advantage for their company. New York is a state that has enacted pay transparency laws, both local and statewide. The state law requires businesses with four or more employees to post pay ranges. The first violation is $1,000, the second is $2,000, and the third forward is $3,000. Pay audits and leveraged compensation strategies will prove to regulators that fair and equitable pay practices are not just a compliance objective for the company but a part of the company culture. P4 noted that you want to create an environment of transparency in your organization.

Pay transparency comes in many forms; therefore, employers must do their due diligence through pay audits, employee surveys, and consultants to determine what form of pay transparency their employees find helpful (Phan-Armaneous, 2022). Distributive transparency, or revealing employee pay, can be far more controversial than procedural transparency, which focuses on how and what is included in compensation calculations

(Montag-Smit & Smit, 2021). According to Phan-Armaneous (2022), even structural pay transparency for promotion and compensation criteria can prevent gender and racial inequities. All four participants discussed experience, nursing certifications, and education as compensation criteria to consider. Structural pay transparency will show how those factors affect pay bands, and only those factors affect pay bands. So, leaders must carefully implement the degree of transparency that is strategically fit for their organization.

Transparency as a strategy goes much deeper. A transparent system will highlight pay disparities because all parties are simultaneously privy to the same information. P4 noted an example which highlights this issue. She recalled how employees seem only interested in whether their starting salary is a market competitive rate. They are blind to internal inequities. She said, "They must be there for a while to understand." For example, "When Sally Jo got her promotion, she would see a $10,000 increase. But when I got the same promotion, I only got $6,000. So, I mean, it is not until you get to those points in the journey of your organization that you realize it. They do not recognize that maybe they should have been looking at their counterparts."

Transparency pay strategies aim to achieve pay equity by strategically sharing information that will empower employees. According to Scott et al. (2020), their global study on employee perspectives and pay transparency indicates a relationship between pay communication, fairness, and transparency. Participants 3 and 4 both agree. According to P3, the job postings are just the first component of the process. They now have the wage range included in all postings. All four participants ensure managers do

not ask applicants about their prior salary. According to P3, leaders offer applicants wages based on factors such as experience, skills, and what is equitable for the applicants and other people. P4 takes it a step further. Her approach to standardizing wages encompasses pay transparency. P4 starts with a compensation philosophy incorporating pay transparency, which she believes will equate to pay equity.

Ties to Conceptual Framework

A central premise of the equity theory is that employees not only measure their outputs against their inputs but also compare their outputs and inputs to those of other employees. Under this theory, employees will need more than just a pay range post to perceive their pay as fair and equitable. The employees will require more transparency in the organization's pay structure. Employees who understand how employers pay them are more likely to perceive those employers pay them fairly.

Ties to the Literature

Employers tie compensation structure strategies to the specific facility type and budget needs. Policies and procedures geared toward pay standardization strategy could show regulators that leaders are making a good-faith effort to comply with equal pay regulations. Most regulators are looking for this reasonable faith effort and a willingness to find and correct any pay discrepancies (L&E Global Alliance of Employers' Counsel Worldwide, 2024). Thus, leaders who put forth this good faith effort could minimize costs of potential fines and penalties from regulatory audits.

Some common compensation payment structures include a narrow base pay structure, a vast range base pay structure, and an exempt worker pay structure. A nurse's

years of experience drive a narrow base pay structure. Pay increases with each year of experience, eventually leading to only cost-of-living increases. Bradley (2021) states the vast range base structure is more difficult to manage under a fair and equitable pay philosophy because pay decisions are often random and subjective. The exempt worker pay status structure is also difficult to use for nursing because nurses are commonly required to work long shifts. Special pay practices such as hazard pay, shift premiums, and specialty certification pay are generally applied in crises and may only be used for nurses in critical clinical settings (Bradley, 2021). In short, the narrow range base pay structure provides the best foundation for performing pay equity evaluations.

Theme 3: Respect for the Nursing Profession

The challenges of COVID-19 taught the medical profession that nurses are essential. Nurses play a key role in medical care and are the most significant part of the staff. P4 declared that COVID-19 taught everyone many lessons. That crisis taught healthcare leaders that a hospital cannot survive without nurses. According to P2, employers need them to work in dangerous and stressful situations. As a leader of a large long-term care facility, she found it challenging to find nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the fear of the disease and how it could spread in nursing homes. P2 conveyed admiration for the nursing profession. She exclaimed that nursing is somewhat labor intensive; however, most nurses have a four-year degree. She is confused about the lack of professional respect for nurses she has seen throughout her healthcare career.

P3, however, did share some positive thoughts about her view of nursing wages compared to other healthcare professionals:

> At least at our organization, you get comparable wages and annual market reviews. Our nurses earn at a level that puts them close to our physician assistants and ARNP's, like our mid-level providers. Some acute hospital nurses are gaining so much that they're nipping at the heels of those like what you would call higher-level mid-level professionals.

Thus, she concluded that any issue with wage devaluation has and will correct itself. In her organization, leaders treat nurses with the same professional respect as other skilled caretakers, such as physician assistants, and this has positively affected their wages.

Another trend that may make a difference in nursing is the growing number of doctoral-prepared nurses. Major funding organizations need doctoral-prepared nurses with research skills for teaching and community health initiatives (Roberts & D'Errico, 2023). Nurses with a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and those with a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) infuse innovative ideas into healthcare. However, Dongen et al.(2024) found that the development of these nurses is not supported professionally in the field. Doctoral-prepared nurses face limited avenues for growth and advancement in the workplace. P4 delved deeper into the topic. She noted a significant problem with the pay of doctoral-prepared nurses of color in the field that needs to be adjusted.

Ties to Conceptual Framework

The intrinsic value of someone's work is subjective. The occupational wage devaluation theory posits that society values the tasks performed in an occupation with a high proportion of women less than those performed in a male-dominated occupation (Hodge & Hodge, 1965). Women workers have often done caring skills tasks, and there

is a presumption of bias towards those who prefer to perform those tasks. The findings from this study support that idea. Leaders perceive the work performed by nurses as mostly labor-intensive as opposed to the caring skills tasks performed by other healthcare professionals, whose workforce is not predominantly female. However, opinions or perceptions of the current climate in nursing are not an accurate measure of occupational wage devaluation. Murphy and Oesch (2016) and Brick et al. (2023) agree that researchers can only measure the wage devaluation effect longitudinally over a long period. Thus, the findings of this study could not fully support that theory.

Ties to the Literature

The effects of COVID-19 changed perceptions of the nursing industry and revealed the need for more adjustments. According to Lee et al. (2021), what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic could have implications for nursing and nursing policies. COVID-19 made leaders more aware of nurses' impact and the risks they incur. Training and career development policies could be one solution to improving the profession's outlook and symbolizing professional respect (Zhang et al., 2022). The increasing number of doctoral-prepared nurses need programs to guide their careers and keep them on the frontlines of nursing.

Application to Professional Practice

The findings from this study align with existing literature on compensation standardization practices in a women-dominated profession, as they relate to equal pay legislation and regulatory fines. Each HR healthcare leader agreed that nurses are a significant portion of the healthcare staff and face many challenges in standardizing

nursing pay. HR healthcare leaders require effective and practical methods to develop compliant pay practices that mitigate costs of regulatory fines while managing litigation risk, which Kagumya (2020) identified as a core objective of compensation plans. Contrary to the results of research by Douglas and Ravenswood (2019), the findings from this study indicate that pay equity can be pragmatic. One of the reasonable and accessible methods of pursuing pay equity strategized by participants in this study, which corresponds with Kagumya's research, was the development of compensation committees to oversee transformation. Two other key findings correlating to the literature were creating objective pay measurements (Sandburg, 2017) and building transparency (Wrohlich & Zucco, 2017). Thus, the conclusions of this study are effective strategies that could help healthcare leaders standardize nursing pay and mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines.

Complying with government regulations is essential in the healthcare field. The HR healthcare leaders in this study explained how leaders could use business strategy to standardize nursing pay while complying with equal pay regulations and minimizing regulatory fines. A good-faith effort to prioritize pay equity can appeal to regulators. Participants in the study noted that leaders can show good faith effort by incorporating a pay strategy in the overall business strategy. Similarly, Ali and Anwar (2021) and Majekodunmi (2019) advised aligning the pay strategy with the overall company strategy. The effects of pay inequity on employee morale could affect business productivity. The results of this study provide leaders with knowledge to incorporate the

growing number of state and federal pay equity requirements into strengthening the company's goals.

Implications for Social Change

Business leaders promoting policy changes related to local and global social issues raise awareness for those issues. Pay equity has a global impact, and measures to address this concern are occurring in many countries. Pay equity initiatives could improve the economic viability of women workers and thus protect many families from poverty (Peck, 2020). Corporate social responsibility, incorporated with labor business practices, impacts social change (Sheehy & Farneti, 2021). Healthcare HR participants in this study described strategies business leaders can use to change policies and improve pay equity. P4 argued that an “erosion of purchasing power” occurs when an organization’s leaders do not acknowledge pay disparities. For example, the employee only has two dollars to spend on household supplies for their family versus five dollars, significantly impacting the family’s buying power over time. Thus, findings from this study could positively affect many households worldwide, especially the large number of households led by women workers.

Healthcare organizations provide resources for improving their communities' health and employment opportunities. According to Peck (2020), evidence shows income-producing social policies can lead to future health benefits for a community. Strategies to standardize nurse wages, which mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines, can help healthcare leaders recruit and retain nurses to serve the health needs of

underserved communities. These strategies could also create many new jobs in those areas. Providing health services and jobs are both critical for stabilizing a community.

Recommendations for Action

Nursing healthcare leaders from private nonprofit organizations can use the findings from this study to foster strategies for standardizing pay to mitigate costs of equal pay regulatory fines. First, leaders can use the findings from this study to address upper leadership's concerns about pay equity and how it will affect business sustainability. The findings from this study revealed that HR leaders sometimes find it difficult to obtain full support from executives. Second, I recommend that leaders work with management and employees on what pay philosophy works for the organization. This study revealed that some employees are unaware of the organization's pay practices. Third, I recommend that all leaders meet and work with local and state regulatory agencies to express a willingness to make every effort to comply with equal pay regulations. The results of this study revealed that regulators often expect businesses to make a good-faith effort to comply with regulations by conducting self-pay equity audits. These audits may help mitigate costs of regulatory fines and litigation risk.

This study will spark discussion surrounding equal pay legislative regulations among scholars and business leaders. The results would work well in academic, business, and industry periodicals. The results will also supplement the literature provided by federal, state, and local government agencies to business owners. These government agencies and some business outlets have provided online seminars. These findings will

supplement the information presented in those avenues. The findings will inform executive officers and scholars unaware of the legislative push for pay equity.

Recommendations for Further Research

A small sample of HR leaders from private non-profit hospital systems in the United States limited the current study. Other studies could delve deeper into healthcare organizations by focusing on private practitioner practices. Such a study could provide insight into the effect of equal pay legislation on small organizations. Their strategies may differ from sizeable multistate healthcare organizations because they face different challenges.

There are many studies on the gender pay gap that contribute to the literature. However, this qualitative study approached the subject from the business perspective and garnered meaningful data from the pay leaders and decision-makers in the business. Researchers could also conduct this study in other professions. Although this study was limited to nursing, different professions, such as librarians, teachers, and social workers, are predominantly women. Future studies in those professions may enrich research on equal pay regulations and their effects.

Reflections

I chose to pursue my doctorate at Walden University because the school's diverse academia promotes positive social change, and I want to work with future change agents. Participants for my doctoral study shared rich knowledge during our semistructured interviews, which was both valuable and enlightening. Finding participants willing and able to share their time for this doctoral study was challenging, but the outcome was

worth it. I am pleased that the participants were all passionate about their work and excited about being change agents.

Reflecting on my DBA journey, I remember the class discussions on ethics, corporate social responsibility, and business sustainability. The arguments for and against are much more meaningful now that I have completed my doctoral research study. I gained extensive knowledge of human resources and healthcare practices relevant to many business models. I also considered Kotter's 8-step change model and its applicability to transformational business leadership for this study. Models are often ideal for creating transformational changes. I now understand that even one simple change can impact the lives of many. We all need to do our part, however small, to enact positive social change.

Conclusion

Healthcare organizations face challenges with the growing number of proposed and passed pay equity legislation. The overarching goal of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore successful strategies that nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize pay and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines. The target population was experienced human resource executives of multi-state private non-profit hospitals in the US with extensive knowledge of nurse wages and equal pay regulations. Through purposive sampling, the final sample population consisted of four healthcare human resources leaders from multi-state private hospitals in the US in compliance with state equal pay regulations. I collected data from public regulatory agencies and semistructured interviews with the four participants. NVivo 14 was used to help with

coding the data. After careful analysis and synthesis, the following themes emerged: (a) challenges to implementation of standardization strategies, including constant market changes due to shortages of nurses, lack of leadership support, lack of employee engagement, and lack of strategic planning or crisis planning, strategies for standardizing pay structure which includes shared services, defined pay philosophies, and transparency, and respect for the nursing profession. The findings from this study may help business leaders overcome challenges to standardizing pay structures and successfully implementing change.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Introduction

My introduction to the interviewee included the following: Hello. My name is Pamela Davis, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am conducting research for a study on strategies for standardizing nurses' pay to mitigate equal pay regulatory fines. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today to participate in this important study. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore strategies nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate the cost of equal pay regulatory fines.

Announcements

Before I began the interview, I reminded the participants of the following:

1. The information collected for this study will remain confidential and I will use a pseudonym, not the participant's name.
2. I will make handwritten notes during the interview; however, I will record the interview and store it on a thumb drive for accuracy.
3. I will safely store and lock away all research documents and computer thumb drive data for a minimum of five years and then destroy them.
4. I will provide a summary of the interview data to the interviewee for member checking to verify that I have accurately represented the interviewee's statements.
5. Each interview should last 20 to 30 minutes, and I will schedule a 20-minute follow-up session with each participant to review the data and allow the interviewee to expand on any information.

Interview Participants

The target population was four nursing healthcare and human resource leaders from four private, non-profit hospitals in the United States, which comply with state equal pay regulations.

Research Question

The overarching research question was what strategies do nursing healthcare and human resource leaders use to standardize wages and mitigate the cost of equal pay regulatory fines.

Interview Questions

1. What are the strategies you find effective for standardizing a wage structure in nursing to comply with equal pay regulations and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines?
2. How do the leaders in your organization assess the effectiveness of the strategies to standardize wages and comply with equal pay regulations?
3. What were the principal issues you considered before developing and implementing strategies to standardize wages and mitigate the cost of equal pay regulatory fines?
4. What procedures did you follow to implement strategies to standardize wages and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines?
5. What key challenges affected your ability to implement strategies to standardize wages and mitigate equal pay regulatory fines?

6. How did you address the key challenges to implementing the strategies for standardizing wages and mitigating equal pay regulatory fines?
7. How do you think your strategy regarding assurance of fair compensation influences your recruitment process?
8. How did you address the issue that business leaders may view historically female occupations, such as nursing, as less valued than historically male occupations?
9. What other relevant information about your organization's strategies to standardize wages and comply with equal pay regulations would you like to share?

Conclusion

As I conducted the interview, I watched for non-verbal clues as well. I paraphrased participant responses and probed further with "why" questions for clarification. I concluded the interview by thanking the participant for joining the study, and I scheduled a time for a follow-up meeting to review the findings.

Appendix B: Social Media Flyer