

# Reasserting Internal Equity: A Multidimensional Equity Framework for Modern Pay Management

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## **Abstract**

Pay management is a critical function of Human Resource Management (HRM), with fairness as its central concern. Traditionally, internal equity has been ensured through systematic job evaluation methods such as the point system. However, contemporary organizational practice shows a shift toward market-based pay, while recent textbooks give diminishing attention to job evaluation. This paper addresses this paradox by proposing a multidimensional framework of equity consisting of primary equity, internal equity, external equity, and inputs equity. It argues that modern pay systems overemphasize external equity at the expense of other dimensions, thereby undermining fairness and consistency. The paper reasserts the importance of systematic job evaluation as a key mechanism for ensuring internal equity and advocates for an integrated approach to pay management that balances all four dimensions. The study contributes to HRM theory and practice by offering a comprehensive conceptualization of pay equity and a practical framework for evaluating compensation systems.

**Key Words:** Compensation, External Equity, HRM Theory, Internal Equity, Job Evaluation, Pay Management

## **Introduction**

Ensuring fairness or equity in pay remains one of the most challenging and enduring responsibilities of Human Resource Management (HRM). Equity in compensation is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity, as it directly influences employee motivation, retention, performance, and organizational stability (Milkovich, Newman, & Gerhart, 2017). To ensure equity is a core objective of pay management, defined as the systematic process of developing, implementing, and maintaining a base pay system that is perceived as fair (Opatha, 2009). Base pay, distinct from incentives, bonuses, or employee benefits (such as welfare facilities), refers to the foundational wage or salary paid to employees for their core job duties. Historically, internal equity, i.e., fairness in pay relative to

contributions within the organization has traditionally been pursued through structured job evaluation methods, with the point-factor system emerging as the gold standard. This approach systematically assesses jobs against compensable factors like skill, responsibility, effort, and working conditions to establish relative worth and hierarchical pay structures (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

Yet, contemporary organizations have increasingly shifted away from these classical techniques toward market-driven approaches, including salary surveys, broadbanding, and total rewards strategies that prioritize external competitiveness over internal alignment. This evolution is driven by globalization, talent wars, and agile organizational designs, where flexibility trumps rigidity. Compounding this trend, many recent HRM textbooks offer limited and superficial coverage of job evaluation, often relegating it to a historical footnote amid discussions of competency-based pay or AI-assisted market pricing (e.g., Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2021). Such shifts reflect a growing divergence between foundational HRM principles rooted in Adams' (1965) equity theory and Jaques' (1961) concept of felt-fair pay and the pragmatic demands of modern practice. The result is a pervasive erosion of internal equity, manifesting in perceptions of pay injustice that undermine trust and productivity.

In the Sri Lankan context, this challenge is particularly acute and multifaceted. A general observation of local organizations reveals widespread employee dissatisfaction with pay structures, fueled by low wage levels, persistent pay anomalies, and inadequate internal alignments. Empirical evidence from labor statistics underscores this: the Department of Labour and the Employees' Provident Fund report recurrent grievances over salary disparities, with pay-related disputes accounting for over 40% of industrial actions in the past decade (Department of Labour, Sri Lanka, 2024). Low pay, exacerbated by economic volatility including the 2022 crisis, has triggered frequent strikes and work stoppages, particularly in the public sector. Government organizations, such as state corporations and ministries, have borne the brunt, experiencing over 150 major industrial actions since 2015, many explicitly linked to demands for equitable pay scales and rectification of anomalies between similar roles (Public Service Commission Annual Report, 2023). Private sector firms, including export-oriented garment manufacturers and banking institutions, face analogous issues, with high turnover rates (averaging 20-25% annually) attributed to perceived inequities in promotions and grading (Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration, 2025). These disruptions not only incur direct economic losses estimated at LKR 50 billion in foregone productivity but also erode Sri Lanka's competitiveness amid brain drain and skill shortages in key sectors like IT, Health, education and manufacturing.

This paper argues that the issue is not the obsolescence of job evaluation, but rather the lack of a comprehensive conceptual framework of equity in pay management. In response, the paper introduces a four-dimensional model of equity and repositions job evaluation within this broader framework. The primary theoretical contribution of this paper is the development and articulation of a multidimensional framework of pay equity consisting of primary, internal, external, and inputs equity.

## Research Objectives

This conceptual paper seeks to:

1. Examine the limitations of contemporary market-driven pay management practices with regard to equity.
2. Conceptualize pay equity as a multidimensional construct consisting of primary equity, internal equity, external equity, and inputs equity.
3. Reassert the importance of systematic job evaluation as a mechanism for ensuring internal equity.
4. Propose an integrated framework for developing fair, rational, and sustainable pay systems.

## Method

This study adopts a conceptual research design, which is appropriate for theory development, clarification of constructs, and advancement of new frameworks in HRM. A process of conceptual clarification and reconstruction was employed. Key constructs such as pay, equity, and job evaluation were examined using both nominal definitions (to understand how terms are used in existing literature) and working definitions (to establish precise meanings for the purpose of this study). Through this analytical process, four distinct but interrelated dimensions of equity, i.e., primary equity, internal equity, external equity, and inputs equity were identified and systematically defined. The methodological approach is therefore analytical, interpretive, and integrative, aiming not at empirical generalization but at theoretical advancement and practical insight. The validity of the proposed framework rests on its logical consistency, conceptual clarity, and its ability to explain and address real-world pay management challenges. As such, this study contributes to the tradition of conceptual HRM research that seeks to refine theoretical understanding and guide managerial practice through systematic reasoning rather than empirical testing.

## Conceptualizing Equity in Pay Management

Fair pay can be understood as pay that ensures equity, defined as the degree of reasonableness in compensation. To ensure equity is an objective sought through effective compensation management which strives for internal and external equity (Werther and Davis, 1996). Two additional types of equity are primary equity and inputs equity (Opatha, 2009). Rather than being a single construct, equity in pay management is multidimensional. This paper proposes four types of equity: (1) Primary Equity; (2) Internal Equity; (3) External Equity; and (4) Inputs Equity. These four types collectively provide a holistic basis for evaluating the fairness of a pay system.

Primary equity refers to the extent to which pay enables employees to meet their basic or physiological needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter. A pay system possesses primary equity if it allows employees to maintain a minimum acceptable standard of living. If compensation fails to meet these essential needs, it lacks primary equity regardless of its alignment with other forms of equity. Primary equity is typically assessed through cost-of-

living analysis, making it fundamentally economic and survival-oriented in nature. It also raises important ethical considerations regarding organizational responsibility. To perform HRM functions (including pay management) ethically is an essential dimension of HRM (Silva, Opatha, & Gamage, 2016).

Internal equity refers to the extent to which pay reflects the relative worth of jobs within an organization. It can be explained through three governing principles: (1) Equal pay for equal work; (2) Unequal pay for unequal work; and (3) Inequality of pay should be equal to inequality of work. The third principle introduces proportionality, requiring that differences in pay correspond accurately to differences in job value. Job evaluation, particularly the point system, serves as the primary mechanism for ensuring internal equity. It is a systematic evaluation of all the jobs available within an organization to determine relative worth of every job to ensure internal equity (Werther and Davis, 1996; Aswathappa, 2017). By systematically assessing job characteristics such as skill, effort, responsibility, and working conditions, job evaluation provides a rational basis for pay differentiation. Job evaluation which involves the establishment of a system used to measure the size and significance of all jobs in an organization is the most common method used to compare the relative values of different jobs in order to provide the basis for a rational pay structure (Torrington, Hall, Taylor, & Atkinson, 2008).

External equity refers to the extent to which an organization's pay levels are aligned with those of similar jobs in other organizations. It is typically ensured through salary surveys, industry benchmarking, and market pricing (Mathis & Jackson, 1988; Mathis, Jackson, Valentine, & Meglich, 2017). In modern HRM, external equity has gained prominence due to increased competition for talent. However, while market-based pay ensures competitiveness, it does not necessarily ensure fairness within the organization. Market pricing does not attempt to assess the relative internal worth of a job, and instead it simply assumes that the pay set by other employers is an accurate reflection of a job's worth. (Mathis & Jackson, 1988; Mathis et al., 2017). This is more likely to violate the internal equity in an organization owing to the reasons that jobs are not the same in another organization, and the impact of economic conditions, employer size, and other factors or variables is not adequately considered.

Inputs equity refers to the extent to which pay corresponds to an individual employee's contributions, including competencies, effort, time, and energy. It refers to the degree to which pay received by a particular employee in an organization is related to his or her inputs used to perform duties of the job (Opatha, 2009). This form of equity is inherently perceptual, depending on how employees evaluate the relationship between their inputs and rewards. It is closely linked to motivation and satisfaction and can be assessed through employee perception surveys.

### **An Integrated Model of Pay Equity**

To form an integrated model of pay equity is to ensure that all four types of equity, i.e., primary, internal, external, and inputs are embedded within a single pay system, rendering it inherently sound and sustainable. A sound pay system must achieve these four types of equity

simultaneously, creating a balanced and defensible structure that addresses fairness from multiple perspectives. This integration prevents fragmented approaches where one form of equity is prioritized at the expense of others, which often leads to systemic imbalances.

The model operates through the following four interconnected dimensions:

1. Primary equity: this ensures basic livelihood by providing pay sufficient to meet employees' essential physiological needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities for a minimum acceptable standard of living.
2. Internal equity: this ensures structural fairness by relating pay to the relative worth of the job performed by the employee, as determined through systematic job evaluation methods.
3. External equity: this ensures market competitiveness by aligning the pay received by the employee with that of similar employees performing comparable roles in other organizations, informed by salary surveys and benchmarking.
4. Inputs equity: this ensures perceived fairness by linking the pay received by the employee to his or her individual inputs such as competencies, effort, time, and energy used to perform job duties.

Failure to achieve any one of these dimensions undermines the overall equity of the pay system and can trigger employee dissatisfaction. As more dimensions are violated, dissatisfaction intensifies in a cumulative manner, leading to a cascade of negative organizational outcomes. This aligns with established models of pay satisfaction, such as Edward E. Lawler's facet-satisfaction approach (as discussed in Werther & Davis, 1989), which posits that unmet equity expectations across multiple facets erode overall job attitudes. Pay dissatisfaction, in turn, manifests as job dissatisfaction, resulting in psychological withdrawal, increased dispensary visits, stress-related mental health issues, and diminished well-being. Furthermore, it fosters a desire for higher pay, which adversely affects individual performance, escalates grievances and complaints, provokes industrial actions such as strikes, and prompts active job search behaviors, ultimately culminating in elevated absenteeism and voluntary turnover. Absenteeism and turnover are results of subjective evaluations of benefits and costs as per the classic model called the decision model (Nicholson, 1977 as in Dalton, 1981).

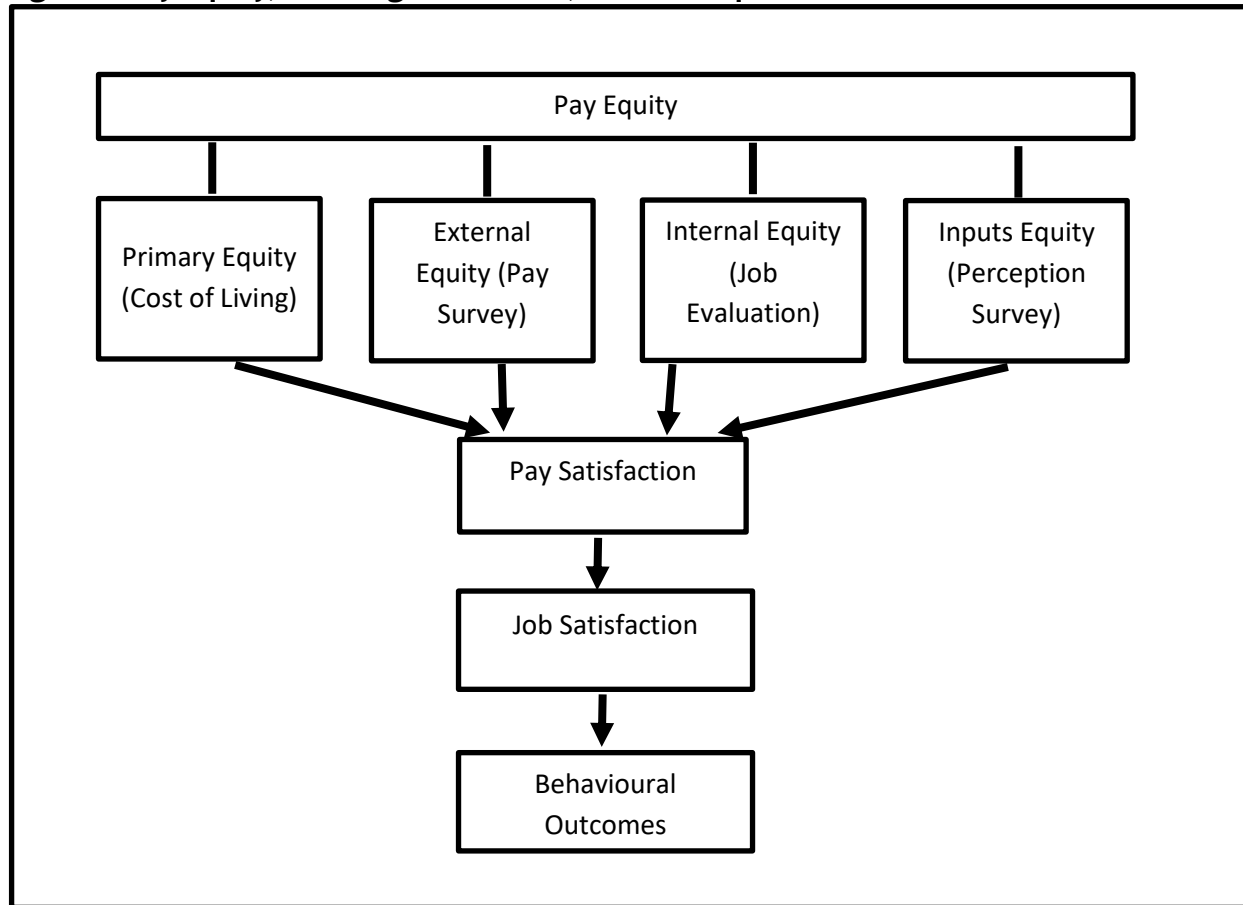
Explaining the importance of equity in pay determination, Torrington et al. (2008, p. 518) assert: *“Whatever methods are used to determine pay levels and to decide what elements make up the individual pay package, employers must ensure that they are perceived by employees to operate equitably. It has long been established that perceived inequity in payment matters can be highly damaging to an organisation. Classic studies undertaken by Adams (1963) found that a key determinant of satisfaction at work is the extent to which employees judge pay levels and pay increases to be distributed fairly. These led to the development by Adams and others of*

*equity theory, which holds that we are very concerned that rewards or ‘outputs’ equate to our ‘inputs’ (defined as skill, effort, experience, qualifications, etc.) and that these are fair when compared with the rewards being given to others.”* The authors further emphasize that perceived inequity triggers employee dissonance or dissatisfaction, manifesting as absenteeism, voluntary turnover, on-the-job shirking, and low-trust relations. Recent meta-analyses affirm equity theory's role in explaining these dynamics, showing perceived fairness in pay strongly predicts job satisfaction, commitment, and lower turnover intentions (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Thus, employers must not only ensure equitable pay practices but also demonstrate their fairness to employees.

Pay inequity has an impact on another critical issue called presenteeism. Though there are three dimensions of the concept of presenteeism, the most popular one in terms of the number of articles is the dimension, i.e., being at work despite being sick (Werapitiya, Opatha, & Fernando, 2015). It is possible that an underpaid employee feels he or she cannot afford to take sick leave, forcing him or her to come to work while being ill. Feelings of worthlessness and resentment are likely to get created owing to pay inequity and if so, it results in causing employees to reduce their effort and being physically present but mentally disengaged.

Pay inequity, particularly lack of primary equity has an impact on unethicity of employees. It tends to increase unethicity of employees or reduce employees' ethicality. Lack of primary equity may encourage employees, at least some employees to engage in unethical practices to earn some extra money to face cost of living and increasing inflation of the goods and services being consumed. To give a pay that possess a sufficient degree of pay equity including all the four types represents ethical performance of pay management function. To maintain justice, fairness and well-being towards employees who are a key type of stakeholders, to perform HRM functions ethically is essential for any organization (Silva, Opatha, & Gamage, 2016). Employee ethical behavior (EB) has been recognized as the behavior that organizations pursue to drive performance and success (Silva, Opatha, & Gamage, 2018). Hence, pay equity which is a cause of ethicality needs to be ensured.

Sound pay management, therefore, requires deliberate strategies to embed these four types of equity within the pay system. These dimensions, i.e., primary, internal, external, and inputs form the core pillars of the model, making it inherently four-dimensional and comprehensive. By pursuing all four concurrently, organizations can foster a robust pay structure that not only complies with legal and ethical standards but also enhances motivation, retention, and productivity. Refer to Figure 1 for a visual representation of the integrated model of pay equity, ensuring mechanism, and consequences.

**Figure 1. Pay Equity, Ensuring Mechanism, and Consequences**

### Critical Evaluation of Contemporary Practice

Modern pay practices in organizations worldwide, including those in Sri Lanka, tend to prioritize external equity through market-driven approaches such as salary surveys, broadbanding, and pay-for-performance schemes. While these methods enhance talent attraction and retention in competitive labor markets, they frequently occur at the expense of internal equity and inputs equity. This imbalance undermines the overall fairness of pay systems, leading to structural flaws and perceptual injustices that erode employee trust and organizational performance.

This overemphasis on external equity manifests in at least four critical issues:

1. Inconsistencies in pay structures. Reliance on market pricing often results in fragmented pay hierarchies, where similar jobs within the organization receive disparate pay rates based on sporadic survey data rather than systematic internal evaluation. For instance, two employees in equivalent roles may earn significantly different salaries if one was hired during a market surge, creating horizontal inequities that contradict the principle of equal pay for equal work.

2. Reduced transparency. Market-based systems obscure the rationale behind pay decisions, as employees rarely gain insight into how external benchmarks translate to individual pay levels. Unlike job evaluation's transparent point-factor methodology, salary surveys are proprietary and opaque or are often inaccessible and difficult for employees to understand, fostering perceptions of arbitrariness and leaving employees questioning the legitimacy of their compensation.
3. Increased managerial discretion and bias. Without a structured internal framework, managers exercise greater latitude in setting pay, often influenced by subjective factors such as personal relationships, negotiation skills, or implicit biases related to gender, ethnicity, or tenure. This discretion amplifies risks of favoritism and discrimination, particularly in contexts like Sri Lanka where cultural norms may intersect with pay decisions.
4. Weak alignment between job value and pay. External equity assumes market rates accurately reflect job worth, yet this overlooks organizational-specific factors like unique working conditions or strategic priorities. Consequently, high-value internal roles may be underpaid relative to their contribution, while commoditized market-driven roles inflate pay structures, distorting resource allocation and motivational equity.

These shortcomings are evident in the Sri Lankan context, where public sector pay commissions grapple with anomalies from ad-hoc adjustments, and private firms in garments and IT sectors report rising grievances over pay compression. The proposed four-dimensional equity model addresses these gaps by reintegrating job evaluation and perceptual checks alongside market data, ensuring a balanced approach that mitigates contemporary pitfalls while preserving competitiveness.

### **Implications for HRM Education and Practice**

The declining emphasis on job evaluation in contemporary HRM textbooks and teaching curricula risks weakening the analytical foundation of future HR professionals, leaving them ill-equipped to address internal equity challenges amid market-driven trends. This gap is particularly concerning in contexts like Sri Lanka, where pay anomalies persist across public and private sectors, demanding rigorous diagnostic skills. HRM education must therefore reaffirm job evaluation as a core analytical tool, integrating it with broader equity dimensions to produce well-rounded practitioners capable of navigating modern complexities. In a Sri Lankan comprehensive exploratory study about entry level HRM job opportunities and their requirements it was found that analytical skills are a very important competency requirement of found 29 competencies (Arulrajah & Opatha, 2012). Job evaluation skills are under technical capability in HRM. Technical capability in HRM is regarded as the *sine qua non* of excellent job performance on a HRM position, and a person with high degrees of other skills but without a high degree of HRM technical skills becomes ineffective and inefficient in performing on HRM arena (Arulrajah & Opatha, 2010).

It is possible to mention here four key recommendations for education and practice. First recommendation is curriculum reinforcement. HRM degree or diploma programs should allocate substantial coverage to job evaluation methods, particularly the point-factor system, through hands-on exercises, case studies, and simulations. Students must master not only technical application but also its integration with primary, external, and inputs equity, fostering a holistic mindset. Second recommendation is multidimensional equity training. Future HR professionals require training to conceptualize and operationalize the four-dimensional equity model proposed here. This involves analytical tools like cost-of-living adjustments (primary), salary surveys (external), perception audits (inputs), and job analysis (internal), enabling balanced pay system design. Third recommendation is balancing rigor and flexibility in practice. Practitioners should adopt hybrid approaches that combine job evaluation's structure with market flexibility. The use of technology like AI-assisted grading while maintaining transparency is possible. Regular equity audits to assess all four dimensions can prevent drift toward external bias. Fourth recommendation is professional development initiatives. HRM bodies, such as the Institute of Personnel Management Sri Lanka (IPM), should offer certifications and workshops emphasizing evidence-based pay management. This ensures strategic thinking is underpinned by systematic, defensible processes, elevating HRM from transactional to transformational.

Professional HRM demands not only visionary strategic thinking but also disciplined, evidence-based approaches rooted in equity principles. By embedding the four-dimensional framework in education and practice, organizations can cultivate pay systems that sustain motivation, compliance, and competitiveness.

The declining emphasis on job evaluation in textbooks and teaching may weaken the analytical foundation of future HR professionals. Therefore, HRM education should continue to emphasize job evaluation as a core analytical tool, students should be trained to understand multidimensional equity, and practitioners should balance rigor and flexibility in pay decisions. Professional HRM requires not only strategic thinking but also systematic and evidence-based approaches.

HRM education is an essential part of Management Education which is concerned with gradual process by which a person gains knowledge, skills and attitudes of Management through learning (Opatha, 2019), and learning is facilitated by teaching. Teaching job evaluation in HRM curricula requires a more comprehensive and application-oriented approach. Notably, most textbooks address the point method using partial or superficial examples that fail to foster deep comprehension of its mechanics. A review of classic textbook literature such as Werther and Davis (1981), Mathis and Jackson (1988), Werther and Davis (1996), Dessler (2000), and Dessler and Varkkey (2018) reveals this persistent limitation. In contrast, recent scholarship (Opatha, 2024) delineates two theoretical approaches to the point method: the closed approach and the open approach. The traditional closed approach, alternatively termed the limited scoring approach, evaluates job worth using a fixed maximum total point (e.g., 500 or 1000) and a predetermined maximum number of levels (e.g., 4 or 5) per subfactor, with consistent point intervals across levels. Conversely, the modern open

approach, or unlimited scoring approach, does not impose a fixed maximum total point and a predetermined maximum number of levels per subfactor, permitting variable levels per factor (e.g., five for one factor, seven for another) based on factor nature. Furthermore, point allocations under the open approach reflect each level's relative importance, allowing for either consistent or variable intervals.

Equity remains the cornerstone of efficient and effective pay management. However, understanding equity as a multidimensional construct reveals that fairness cannot be achieved through a single approach. This paper has proposed a four-dimensional framework of equity and demonstrated that job evaluation remains essential for ensuring internal equity within this broader system. While modern practices have evolved, the need for systematic and rational approaches has not diminished. Reasserting the importance of internal equity and job evaluation is essential for maintaining fairness, consistency, and professionalism in HRM.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Equity remains the cornerstone of efficient and effective pay management, serving as the linchpin for employee motivation, employee trust, organizational justice, and long-term performance. However, viewing equity as a unidimensional construct, i.e., whether internal, external, or otherwise limits its utility in dynamic environments. This conceptual paper has advanced a comprehensive four-dimensional framework encompassing primary, internal, external, and inputs equity, and demonstrated that job evaluation retains indispensable value as the anchor for internal fairness or reasonableness within this integrated model.

While modern pay practices have evolved toward market responsiveness and flexibility, the imperative for systematic, rational, and transparent approaches endures undiminished. Overreliance on external benchmarks, as critiqued earlier, breeds inconsistencies, biases, and perceptual injustices that no amount of competitiveness can fully offset. Reasserting internal equity through structured job evaluation, harmonized with other dimensions, equips HRM practitioners with a robust toolset for contemporary challenges.

Ultimately, this framework offers both theoretical advancement and practical guidance, particularly for resource-constrained settings like Sri Lanka, where pay-related disruptions remain prevalent. By adopting this multidimensional lens, organizations and educators can restore professionalism to pay management, ensuring fairness that resonates at economic, structural, comparative, and individual levels. The path forward lies in synthesis: honoring classical rigor while embracing modern adaptability to forge pay systems that are equitable, sustainable, and strategically potent.

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