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Reflection Report 03

# When Purpose Is Not Enough: Reflections on GreenPrice





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## CASE SUMMARY

GreenPrice is a sustainable supermarket chain in Hong Kong, founded in 2016 by Terence Hon and his university teammates Allison Chan, Ben So, and Cherissa Hung. The venture began as a university competition entry, receiving HKD100,000 in seed funding. Its business model centers on selling short-dated products—items approaching or past their best-before dates—at heavily discounted prices, diverting food waste from landfills.

After early setbacks, including rejection by over 50 suppliers and a failed store in the low-income neighborhood of Sham Shui Po, the founders pivoted to target middle-class consumers, expatriates, and overseas returnees. By June 2023, GreenPrice operated eight profitable stores across Hong Kong, saved over 2.55 million items annually from waste, and employed nearly 100 staff with an average age under 25. The company reinvests 70% of its distributable profits into its social objectives, which the founders frame across four stated dimensions: serving as a last-mile disposal outlet for short-dated stock, making gourmet groceries affordable to a broader middle class, creating “aha moments” around sustainability, and extending a helping hand to underprivileged groups through nonprofit-partnered food distribution.

Despite commercial success and competitive salaries—hunters (sourcers) earned up to HKD384,000 annually, well above the fresh graduate average—GreenPrice faced persistent high employee turnover. Between July and December 2022, office staff turnover reached 67% and store employees 39%. Though rates improved in early 2023 (41% and 35% respectively), warehouse turnover rose from 15% to 27%. The founders attributed this to young employees’ desire to explore different paths, limited promotion opportunities, routine work, and competition from a tight labor market.



## FUNDAMENTAL LEARNINGS

### **A Strong Social Mission Alone Does Not Guarantee Employee Retention**

GreenPrice’s sustainability-driven business model, including reducing food waste, promoting environmental consciousness, and supporting underprivileged communities through donations, is central to its brand and operations. Compensation was also not the weak link: hunters on the sourcing team drew a HKD24,000 monthly base with up to two months of bonus every six months (approaching HKD384,000 annually, above the HKD300,000 fresh-graduate average and more than some real-estate management-trainee schemes), farmers earned roughly HKD20,000 a month plus four months of annual bonus, and frontline staff made HKD17,000—20,000 against the HKD13,000—14,000 typical at comparable retailers. However, this mission and pay package were not sufficient to retain young talent who sought clear career progression or varied experiences. This suggests that for mission-driven organizations, particularly those employing young people, the social purpose must be complemented by structured career development and engaging work design to sustain commitment.

### **Organizational Structure and Role Design Shape Employee Experience**

GreenPrice’s flat hierarchy and young team minimized communication barriers and fostered a collaborative environment. However, the nature of the work itself—particularly for hunters who faced constant rejection and routine cold-calling, and for store fulfilment teams who had to reset stores at midnight—contributed to perceptions of repetitiveness. A farmer at GreenPrice typically carried around 150 supplier relationships—roughly seven times the ~20 on a traditional-retail buyer’s plate—and each of the eight stores had about half of its 1,000—1,200 SKUs refreshed twice a week, work that fell largely on the midnight fulfilment shift. This reveals a tension between operational demands and the desire for stimulating work among young employees.

### **Talent Development Must Evolve with the Organization**

The founders’ strategy of hiring recent graduates and training them from scratch proved effective in building a skilled, affordable workforce aligned with the company’s culture. By June 2023 that approach had built a roughly 100-person organisation spanning supplier relationships (8), retail store operations (29), warehouse (10), store fulfilment (10), sourcing expansion (4), and smaller specialist teams in marketing and communications, training, project management, finance and HR. However, as these employees gained experience and their salaries increased, the lack of clear promotion pathways became a retention risk. This underscores the need for organizations to continuously adapt their human capital management systems to match the evolving expectations of a maturing workforce.

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS



### For Social Entrepreneurs and Mission-Driven Organizations

- GreenPrice offered competitive pay and a compelling social purpose, yet still experienced high turnover among young staff. How far purpose alone can carry retention in this setting is an open question; career pathway design, role variety, and progression structures may matter at least as much once the initial enthusiasm fades.
- GreenPrice's approach of hiring recent graduates and training them from scratch proved effective in its early stages. However, as the organization grew, the absence of formal promotion structures became a retention risk. Exactly when a growing organisation's hire-and-train-from-scratch model begins to strain, and what a second-stage talent approach might look like, is less obvious in practice.



### For Funders and Investors

GreenPrice's turnover challenges emerged despite adequate funding for business operations and competitive compensation. Investment in social enterprises may tend to concentrate on operational expansion—product sourcing, store rollout—with comparatively less attention to the HR systems (training programmes, performance management, career pathways) that underpin long-term organisational stability.



### For Policymakers and Educators

The case hints that young graduates may enter the workforce with expectations shaped more by the appeal of a company's mission or culture than by a realistic understanding of day-to-day operational demands. How educational institutions and employers might better align graduate expectations with early-career realities, and how entry-level roles might be designed to help close that gap, is terrain still being worked out.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The GreenPrice case shows that environmental sustainability and commercial success can go hand in hand—its circular economy model has diverted millions of items from landfill while building a profitable business. Yet it also reveals a critical gap: internal sustainability. Despite competitive pay and a strong social mission, high employee turnover persisted, as young staff sought growth and variety their roles lacked.

For purpose-driven organizations, how to build promotion pathways in a small company, how to make inherently repetitive roles feel less routine, and how much day-to-day retention weight a shared mission can reasonably be asked to carry are questions the GreenPrice case leaves open. Cultivating talent with the same rigor applied to environmental outcomes may prove essential for long-term resilience and impact.

*To explore this case in greater depth, we encourage you to visit the [link](#) and get in touch with the team at ACRC.*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We sincerely thank the HKU Asia Case Research Centre (ACRC) for providing the case study “*Emphasizing a Social Mission in Retaining Young Talent? Human Capital Management at GreenPrice*” (Authored by: Yuna Cho, Shipeng Yan, Pauline Yeung), that serves as the foundation for this reflection report. We deeply appreciate ACRC’s ongoing commitment to advancing knowledge in business and management through its rigorous, context-rich cases focused on Asia.

ACRC’s high-quality case materials have consistently provided essential foundations for our **NGO ESG case reflection series**. These carefully researched cases bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications, enabling deeper exploration of complex, real-world challenges across sectors and regions. We also recognize ACRC’s significant role in elevating the global visibility and pedagogical relevance of Asian perspectives within management education.

We look forward to continuing to build upon ACRC’s valuable case library as we develop further insights aimed at fostering thoughtful dialogue and impactful practice in the fields of ESG, sustainability, governance, and social innovation. If you are interested in this Case, please direct to ACRC website to purchase for detailed contents.



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### About HKU Jockey Club Enterprise Sustainability Global Research Institute

The HKU Jockey Club Enterprise Sustainability Global Research Institute is established by HKU Business School and funded by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, to establish a world-class hub for best practices of Sustainability in Hong Kong, Asia and beyond. Our mission is to promote excellence in the field of Sustainability by bringing together globally distinguished scholars from diverse fields, integrating knowledge and practice, inspiring innovation, fostering collaboration and conducting impactful research.

We work in partnership with academics, government departments, NGOs and corporate partners to harness the transformative power of environmental, social and corporate governance to create a sustainable and equitable future.

### About Asia Case Research Centre

The Asia Case Research Centre (ACRC) is a research centre affiliated with The University of Hong Kong, HKU Business School. Established in 1997 to address a growing demand for research and instructive materials relating to Asian business, the Centre now boasts a repository of context-rich cases drawn from a vast range of industries and disciplinary areas.

The ACRC is committed to the advancement of learning and teaching in business education and strives to promote leading management thinking through research on the latest practices in the Asian business environment. We work with scholars from universities and institutions within and outside the region, and enjoy close ties with the business community.



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