

Managing Employee Turnover or 'Look After they Leap'

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In defence of retrospective reports in turnover research

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Overview

- The prevailing methodology for analysing employee turnover is limited because it emphasises prediction rather than understanding.
- We critique this methodology and draw out implications of an alternative: retrospective self-reporting, by actual leavers.
- Three main advantages.
 1. Direct assessment of actual incidents of turnover means interventions are informed by accounts of real events, instead of being based on inference.
 2. This offers insight into the dynamic character of decisions to quit, which are often unpredictable or precipitated by sudden events.
 3. This allows for assessment of the role of non-work factors in quits.
- This allows greater insight into the decision to quit, which is ontologically, socially and dynamically complex and has implications for how we construe and manage turnover.
- Argument illustrated by a study of 352 UK National Health Service nurse leavers.

The Prevailing Methodology

- Turnover is much studied: Over twenty years ago, Muchinsky and Morrow (1980) identified more than 1,500 studies (Shaw et al 1998). Many more in the last two to three decades.
- Usually x-sectional surveys are remotely administered to current workers (Adams & Beehr 1998; Allen & Meyer 1990; Bedeian et al 1991).
- Predictive in intent, they seek to identify causes of turnover (Sager & Griffeth 1998). Two ways this methodology develops causal inferences:
 1. Relationships between constructs are tested analysing respondents' scores (e.g. Chen & Francesco, 2000). E.g. 'commitment' and 'intent to leave' consistently significant and negative (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). From correlation ... evidence of a causal relationship (Boshoff & Mels, 2000).
 2. Surveys administered at T1; at T2 collect 'criterion scores', determining employment status (Steel, 2002; Spreitzer & Mishra, 2002). Comparisons on measures (e.g. commitment, satisfaction) for respondents no longer at the organization at T2 (leavers), and respondents still there (employees).

Critique – Context

Context

- Predictive agenda downplays context. Models derived and tested in predictive studies seek generic explanations by examining the causal ordering of psychological constructs.
- Several problems come from using stable definitions of e.g. commitment.
 1. Different groups may have typical differences in how they demonstrate commitment, expressed in different prevailing 'forces of attachment' (Maertz & Campion, 2004: 570).
 2. Emphasis on normative aspects greater for some workers (Bartol, 1979). May intend to leave a particular employer, but remain committed to a profession.
 3. Different sources of job satisfaction.
 4. Diverse labour market conditions, employees from different occupations may enact search differently.

Critique – Experimental Logic

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Critique – Decision Complexity

Decision Complexity

- Decision to quit is not a, 'cognitive process that can be decomposed into a sequence of simple, programmed steps' (Langley, Mintzberg, Pitcher, Posada & Saint-Macary, 1995, p. 261) but prevailing method, emphasises prediction rather than understanding.
- Leads to an account that is reductionist, and normative, in other words closer to how some theorists would *like* employees to decide to quit. Decisions can be complex in three ways: ontological complexity, social complexity and dynamic complexity (next slide):

Type of Complexity and Extract from Langley et al. (1995)	Implications for a Predictive Agenda
Ontological (The Decision) 'decisions cannot easily be pinned down, in time or in place'	This is a basic problem for the predictive agenda, given its focus on cross-sectional design. It may be impossible to locate a cause, or identify the start of a given decision to quit. The reason for a particular quit may arise after administration of the first survey, and so baseline scores on items could be irrelevant (Steel, 2002); for example, intervening exposure to labour market opportunities could prompt a quit (Kirschenbaum and Weisberg, 1994).
Social (The Decision Maker) 'decision making processes are driven by the emotion, imagination, and memories of the decision makers'	Seeking predictive patterns can reify constructs and types, leading to reductionism that is dehumanising (Thompson and McHugh, 2002). This is common to many psychological models, which sacrifice complexity for parsimony and generality (Weick, 1999). Reliance on surveys comprising closed item scales to predict <i>intention</i> is problematic because it offers no basis for exploring how memories, or emotions relate to actual decision processes. This translates complex, socially constructed decisions that unfold over time, into a common language of linearly ordered constructs.
Dynamic (The Decision Process) 'even when a decision can be isolated, rarely can the process leading up to it [be]'	The evolutionary, or unfolding nature of turnover (Lee et al., 1999), and 'cusp' nature of decisions to quit (Sheridan and Abelson, 1983) present problems for a cross-sectional design. Many quits happen over a short time period (Mobley, 1979), and single, precipitating events play an important role in determining turnover (Auhors, 2004a). So, turnover may defy prediction even over the short term, let alone a 6 month time horizon.

Sample

- Surveyed actual leavers, asked to describe their decision to quit. Aim to enhance understanding of turnover in this context, not identify predictors.
- 8 NHS Trusts agreed to participate (bespoke, management report).
- Diverse in location, size, type + allow access to large body of nurse leavers.
- 4 medium (t/o below £150M), community (non-acute), rural (not in a large city). 4 large, city-based, acute, teaching hospital(s).
- Trusts stated no. of F-t, qual, vol nurse leavers in 2000-1. Pre-sealed envelopes needing address + mailout (returned direct to researchers).
- 1,190 surveys mailed, 368 returned, 352 used - rate of 31%, higher than comparable study by Lee et al (1999) ($\chi^2 = 7.57$, $p < 0.01$, 1 d.f).
- Demographic profile similar to wider population of nurses, most female (91%), mean age 35, and average tenure was 4.1 years.

Measures

- Analysed leavers' responses to three open-ended items.
- One measure of *avoidability*: 'There are things the Trust could have done that might have caused me to stay... please elaborate.' The first part of this item was assessed using a five point Likert strongly agree... strongly disagree scale. The second part, asking for elaboration was followed by several blank lines for respondents to fill in as they saw fit.
- Two items tapped the *reasons* for leaving, following Campion (1991): 'What was the primary reason for leaving your prior post?' and 'Please describe any other important reasons'. Both items were followed by several blank lines.

Illustrative Findings

Decision complexity.

- Difficult to pin down a definitive beginning in time, or initial cause for many leavers' decisions to quit. The following extracts are examples of decision complexity:
- 6023: boredom [P]
- no chance of promotion [O]
- more the government could have done in terms of pay [A]
- 1012: reduced numbers of experienced, competent nursing staff [P]
- departments working in isolation, newly qualified staff not adequately trained thus increasing pressure on existing staff, increased expectations of general public, ward staff are in the frontline and are often criticised by all other departments and specialist nurses therefore morale suffers [O]
- the reasons I left could not be resolved at Trust level i.e. lack of experienced staff, attitudes of relatives and patients and those of some medical staff [A]

Thematic analysis

Code	Description of Theme	Code	Description of Theme
1	Spousal or family-related re location	18	Starting course
2	Clash with subordinate(s) or colleagues	19	Travel problems
3	Management or organisational culture	20	Lack of support
4	Discrimination	21	Qualified for early retirement
5	Bullying	22	Change in financial circumstances
6	Personal family problems or pressures	23	No development / refused opportunity
7	Clash with supervisor or senior manager	24	Mishandled disciplinary procedure
8	Completed a course of training or education	25	Working conditions / safety
9	Promotion or career development	26	Lack of Supervision
10	Clash with patient / MOP / public expect too much	27	Low pay / Concerns over grade
11	Inflexibility of work hours	28	Professional / Personal Development
12	Imposed reorganization of work	29	Job satisfaction / Morale
13	Health	30	Management Structure / Restructuring
14	Pregnancy	31	Cost of Living or Housing
15	Role conflict (unable to give care / undervalued)	32	Stress
16	Short staffed or under-resourced	33	Workload
17	Job offer, opportunity or promotion		

No	Codes	Extract
1023	19, 6	cost of fact, spend more time with family
1024	29, 3, 28	being provided with opportunities to develop knowledge and skills, which were then not able to be put into practice. General dissatisfaction with the management of the directorate
1025	6, 9	personal circumstances changed, advancement opportunities were poor
1026	7, 33, 6, 13	dissatisfied with attitude of my immediate manager and her reluctance to share the workload... pressures of home and family / health

One Implication – Pay

- 'single most important factor reducing likelihood of leaving nursing' - 39% 'better pay' (Robinson et al 1999 - RCN).
- Here 50.6% were dissatisfied (Likert -item, 'At your former Trust, how satisfied were you with the... financial rewards').
- But only six (1.7%) reported pay as the main reason they left.
- This may suggest that:
 - sources of current dissatisfaction are unreliable predictors of turnover
 - or turnover is precipitated by unpredictable events
 - current employees may respond to try to influence a favourable organizational intervention (Vandenberg & Nelson, 1999, p. 1313).
- Rounder picture involves both predictive and retrospective elements.