

## Managing Employee Turnover

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[www.kevinmorrell.org.uk](http://www.kevinmorrell.org.uk)

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## Summary

- The study of employee turnover in the academic literature emphasises prediction rather than understanding.
- This harms the ability of organisations to manage turnover effectively.
- Using reports from actual leavers can be more useful.
- This has three main advantages:
  1. Interventions are informed by accounts of real events.
  2. It offers insight into the dynamic character of decisions to quit, which are often unpredictable or triggered by sudden events.
  3. It allows for assessment of non-work factors.

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## The Predictive Agenda

- Usually surveys are administered to current workers (Adams & Beehr 1998; Allen & Meyer 1990; Bedeian et al 1991).
- These identify causes of turnover in two ways (Sager & Griffith 1998).
  1. Testing relationships between different measures: The relationship between organisational commitment and intent to leave and between job satisfaction and intent to leave (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).
  2. Initial surveys then a follow-up 6 months or a year later. Comparisons on measures (e.g. commitment, satisfaction) for those who left, and continuing employees (Steel, 2002; Spreitzer & Mishra, 2002).

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## Problems with this Agenda

- Organizational data may be inaccurate, e.g. count involuntary turnover as voluntary (Campion, 1991). Exit interview problems.
- These studies use replacement (proxy / surrogate) variables because they don't actually look at leavers – for instance 'intent to leave' (Vandenberg & Nelson 1999).
- We can't draw causal inferences from methods that look at a cross-section or snapshot (Curry 1999).
- This seeks generic explanations > downplays context and limits the opportunity for organizations to learn specific lessons and tailor specific interventions.

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## Problems with Decision Complexity

- Decision to quit is not a, 'cognitive process that can be decomposed into a sequence of simple, programmed steps' (Langley et al 1995) but it is treated this way in the prevailing method.
- Leads to an account that is reductionist, and normative, in other words closer to how some theorists believe employees *ought* to decide to quit.
- Decisions can be complex in three ways: essential complexity, social complexity and dynamic complexity.

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Type of complexity	Implications
Essential 'decisions cannot be pinned down, in time or in place'	It may be impossible to locate a cause, or identify the start of a given decision to quit.
Social 'decisions are driven by the emotion, imagination, and memories of decision makers'	Psychological models sacrifice complexity for simplicity & generality (Weick, 1999).
Dynamic 'even when a decision can be isolated, rarely can the process leading up to it be'	Many quits happen quickly (Mobley, 1979), 'shocks' play an important role in turnover (Morrell et al 2004a).

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## Example – Nurses in the UK NHS

- 4 medium community 'Trusts'; 4 large, city-based.
- Surveyed actual leavers who were asked in confidence to describe their decision to quit.
- Pre-sealed envelopes needed addressing & mailing (returned direct to me) > bespoke management report.
- 1,190 surveys mailed, 368 returned, 352 used - rate of 31%.
- The aim was to enhance understanding of turnover in this context.

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## Key Measures

- Analysed leavers' responses to three open-ended questions.
- *avoidability*: (1) 'There are things the Trust could have done that might have caused me to stay... please elaborate.' The first part was assessed using a five point Likert scale. The second part, asking for elaboration was followed by several blank lines for respondents to fill in as they saw fit.
- *reasons for leaving*, (2) 'What was the primary reason for leaving your prior post?' and (3) 'Please describe any other important reasons'. Both were followed by several blank lines.

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## Illustrative Findings – Decision Complexity

Essential complexity – leaver code no<sup>6</sup>023

- What was the primary reason for leaving your prior post “boredom”
- Please describe any other important reasons “no chance of promotion”
- Things the Trust could have done that might have caused me to stay... please elaborate “the reasons I left could not be resolved at Trust level i.e. attitudes of relatives and patients and those of some medical staff”

Dynamic & Social complexity – leaver 1001

- Primary reason “moved to another town”
- Other reasons “would have stayed but fed up with training needs not being met in work time. Had to do training on days off unpaid”
- Avoidability “given training in working hours, then my partner would have moved down here”

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## One Implication – Pay

- ‘better pay [the] single most important factor reducing likelihood of leaving nursing’ 39% (Robinson et al 1999 - RCN).
- Here, half were dissatisfied with pay.

*But only six (1.7%) reported pay as the reason they left.*

- current dissatisfaction can be an unreliable guide
- turnover is caused by unpredictable events
- employees may try influencing interventions (Vandenberg & Nelson, 1999).

- Effective resourcing involves predictive & retrospective elements.

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