



Organisational change and employee turnover

Employee
turnover

161

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Abstract *Using insights from the relevant literature and recent empirical data, this paper investigates the relationship between organisational change and employee turnover. It proposes a mechanism for how widespread change translates into individual decisions to quit, and corroborates four relevant hypotheses. The paper also illustrates the importance for managers of understanding avoidability – the extent to which turnover decisions can be prevented – and concludes with a research agenda, encapsulated by a model describing the relationship between organisational change and turnover.*

Introduction

Employee turnover is a much studied phenomenon (Shaw *et al.*, 1998, p. 511). Indeed, one recent meta-analysis (Hom and Griffeth, 1995) reviewed over 800 such studies (Iverson, 1999). However, there is no standard account for why people choose to leave an organisation (Lee and Mitchell, 1994). This is noteworthy because it is typically the occasions where people choose to leave (i.e. voluntary, rather than involuntary turnover) that concern organisations and organisational theorists. Voluntary turnover incurs significant cost, both in terms of direct costs (replacement, recruitment and selection, temporary staff, management time), and also (and perhaps more significantly) in terms of indirect costs (morale, pressure on remaining staff, costs of learning, product/service quality, organisational memory) and the loss of social capital (Dess and Shaw, 2001). Although these costs are a feature of involuntary turnover (during downsizing, or where employees are made redundant), turnover is more commonly voluntary. Additionally, whereas in downsizing programmes, the more able employees are retained, when it comes to voluntary turnover, the best performers are also more likely to find alternative employment, and thus leave (Jackofsky *et al.*, 1986).

Although there is no standard framework for understanding the turnover process as a whole, a wide range of factors have been found useful when it comes to interpreting employee turnover, and these have been used to model turnover in a range of different organisational and occupational settings. They include: job satisfaction (Hom and Kinicki, 2001); labour market variables (Kirschenbaum and Mano-Negrin, 1999); various forms of commitment (see Meyer, 2001 for a review); equity (Aquino *et al.*, 1997); psychological contract (Morrison and Robinson, 1997); and many others (see Morrell *et al.* (2001a) for a review). However, there is little research specifically exploring the link between organisational change and turnover and this is a gap in the existing literature.



No one would seriously challenge the idea that mismanaging organisational change can result in people choosing to leave. Indeed, as noted, it may result in the highest performing (and therefore most employable) employees leaving (Jackofsky *et al.*, 1986). However, explaining how and why organisational change can result in differential rates of turnover is less straightforward.

The unfolding model

This paper develops and applies a recent, influential account of employee turnover (Lee *et al.*, 1999) to the problem of how organisational change can influence individual decisions to quit. Lee *et al.*'s (1999) "unfolding model" of voluntary turnover represents a divergence from traditional thinking (Hom and Griffeth, 1995), by focusing more on the decisional aspect of employee turnover, in other words, showing instances of voluntary turnover as decisions to quit. Indeed, the model is based on a theory of decision making, image theory (Beach, 1990). The underlying premise of the model is that people leave organisations in different ways, and it outlines five, prototypical pathways describing different kinds of decision to quit. Each of these describes a different decision process that a leaver may go through before they finally quit. This multi-route model has improved functionality in comparison with unitarist accounts, which are restricted to understanding all people's decisions as influenced by the same factors and considerations. The model represents a significant departure from the founders of modern research into turnover (March and Simon, 1958) as well as from other influential thinkers (Porter and Steers, 1973; Price, 1977).

A notable feature of the unfolding model is its emphasis on the role of a single, jarring event that initiates some decisions to quit. It is this construct – rather than the model as a whole – which forms the theoretical focus for this paper. Lee and Mitchell (1994) refer to this event as a "shock", although it is important to emphasise that a shock need not be unexpected. A shock is described as necessary to, "shake employees from their lethargy" (Lee and Mitchell, 1991, p. 118), resonating with the idea that sunk costs (Becker, 1960), inertia (Mercer, 1979) and a wish to remain in employment (Sheridan and Abelson, 1983) have each been found to be important factors influencing turnover. Understanding the role shocks play in precipitating decisions to quit is directly relevant to understanding the relationship between organisational change and employee turnover. This is because the notion of shock offers a way to understand how there can be linkages between change at the level of structures and social settings on the one hand, and individual agency on the other. In other words, to understand how organisational change influences employee turnover.

This approach is helpful to understanding organisational change management because the evaluation and measurement of change initiatives involves balancing two considerations:

- (1) In terms of the external context, assessing change initiatives involves determining the necessity for the imposition of change at an organisational level.
- (2) In terms of internal resources, for most organisations it will be important to determine the likely impact such change has for individual employees, and to manage the consequences of this change at various stages during the process.

The second point is particularly important to consider if such change leads to increased turnover and a loss of social capital, which may be critical to organisational success (Dess and Shaw, 2001). Understanding the role that shocks typically play in employee turnover can improve evaluation of the impact of change on individual employees. In the light of recent research (Lee *et al.*, 1999, Morrell, 2002), and in light of the findings introduced in this study, managers of change can benefit from employing an understanding of shocks in two ways. First, seeing shock as the initial stage in many leaving decisions gives managers a useful heuristic device to think about intervention, in other words, to stop people leaving. Second, assessing the incidence and type of turnover prompted by these shocks can enhance the ability of managers and organisations to monitor change.

Avoidable turnover

One way of diagnosing the amount of influence organisations have over turnover, is to measure the extent to which decisions to leave are described as “avoidable” by leavers (Campion, 1991; Morrell *et al.*, 2001a). The underlying question this tries to address is, “Could the decision have been prevented by the organisation?” It is important to be clear that this is the underlying question, since when leavers report the avoidability of their decision, this actually gives a measure of their personal perception of whether their decision could have been prevented. This perception may be erroneous for a number of reasons. For example, employees could describe their decision as “avoidable” and specify a desired intervention that would have prevented their leaving, for instance a new office, or a pay rise. From an organisational perspective, this could actually have been cost ineffective, or had other negative ramifications (it may have been seen as unfair by other employees). There are also methodological issues concerning validity and reliability that undermine simple reliance on retrospective reporting (Miller *et al.*, 1997). Avoidability is thus more complex than a simple dichotomy between turnover that could be prevented or not (Maertz and Campion, 2001). Despite these caveats, it is important to assess and understand avoidability during a period of change, because voluntary turnover is a key unwanted consequence, and cost of change.

Supplementing even a crude measure of turnover, such as the base rate – (number of leavers in a year/average number of employees in a year) * 100 – with a measure of avoidability, is likely to improve the basis for human

resource planning (Morrell, 2002). For example, if a firm can identify that much of their voluntary turnover is unavoidable, they may profit better from initiatives that seek to manage turnover *post hoc*, such as by streamlining recruitment processes, rather than spend on theorised preventative measures, such as increasing pay. This might be called a control model (Morrell, 2002). On the other hand, if the bulk of turnover is avoidable this offers the potential for directed intervention – a prevention model (Morrell, 2002). If organisations introduce change and experience a resultant increase in turnover, it is important for them to be able to identify whether this change is typically avoidable, or unavoidable in order to manage it effectively. Determining this will enable them to manage the trade off between attending to the competitive context on the one hand, and maintaining internal capability on the other. This can be illustrated in more detail using three hypothetical scenarios:

- (1) *Scenario 1.* If turnover increases as a result of the implementation of change, and this turnover is mainly unavoidable (i.e. the organisation could not prevent it), then – bearing in mind that turnover results in substantial indirect costs that may be difficult to measure – an organisation can calculate the cost of the change, setting these against the supposed benefits. In a sense, this represents an ideal scenario, one where the impact of change is easy to identify and to understand, and where it is comparatively simple to calculate cost-benefit. In this case, these leavers represent the proverbial eggs in the omelette, or to use a military analogy, they can be described as “necessary casualties”. Of course if managers in the organisation do not recognise that these casualties are unavoidable, they may try spurious initiatives designed to retain them, representing a waste of resources, or “chasing shadows”.
- (2) *Scenario 2.* If turnover has increased as a result of the implementation of change, and the levels of avoidable and unavoidable turnover are approximately equal, then it will be beneficial to look more closely at the phenomenon and uncover those areas where intervention will result in lower levels of avoidable turnover. This represents a mid-point, where the internal impact of change is difficult to understand, but signalling substantial room for improvement. Continuing the military analogy, in this instance change could result in “unacceptable losses” if managers pursued either a pure control or prevention paradigm. On the other hand, if it is possible to identify patterns of turnover correctly and to control the costs of some unavoidable turnover, while minimising some instances of avoidable turnover, this is analogous to managing effectively, albeit in the “fog of war”.
- (3) *Scenario 3.* If turnover has increased as a result of the implementation of change, and it is predominantly avoidable, then this implies that the process is being mismanaged, and that an organisation is passing up on the chance to retain its staff. In this instance change could result in the

“charge of the Light Brigade”, a futile and needless loss of valuable employees. However, if change managers can identify and successfully intervene in those areas that would otherwise lead to avoidable decisions to quit, that would represent a notable victory, and the effects of change could be militated against effectively “bringing the troops back home”.

To recap, if turnover is generally avoidable, this offers the potential for directed intervention, and thereby prevention. If it is unavoidable, it will be better to concentrate on managing the phenomenon by reducing its cost, and thereby control turnover after the event. Since there is the potential for this process to be disastrously mismanaged, this implies that there is a need for organisations to assess patterns of avoidability in the overall profile of employee turnover. This level of measurement is needed in order not to incur unnecessary losses, or wrongly try to prevent something when resources would be better spent managing the consequences. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Having outlined the theoretical background to the research, the remainder of the paper mainly concerns the empirical element of this study.

Overview

The project tested the unfolding model by studying the leaving decisions of 352 National Health Service (NHS) nurses, using a slightly modified version of Lee *et al.*'s (1999) questionnaire. Lee *et al.* had studied 229 accountant leavers in the USA and so some changes in the questionnaire were necessary to reflect differences in national and organisational context. A short pilot of the questionnaire (with 15 nurses and midwives), informed other changes, and the revised survey also incorporated additional refinements based on a theoretical critique of the model (Morrell *et al.*, 2001b). The original sample frame

Turnover Thought To Be	Avoidable	Chasing Shadows X	Unacceptable Losses ?	Bringing Back The Troops √
	Mix	Unacceptable Losses ?	The Fog Of War √	Unnecessary Casualties ?
	Unavoidable	Necessary Casualties √	Unnecessary Casualties ?	Charge Of The Light Brigade X
		Unavoidable	Mix	Avoidable

Actual Turnover

√ = Fit
? = Overlap
X = Misfit

Figure 1.
Theorised interactions
between perceived and
actual levels of avoidable
turnover

comprised voluntary leavers in the financial year 2000-2001, at eight NHS Trusts. The Trusts were drawn from three regions and three of the larger Trusts had recently undergone mergers, with one other facing the prospect of merger in the near future. Another of the Trusts was undergoing a substantial programme of development, including the building of a new multi-storey wing.

These Trusts were not in any way chosen as representative of the NHS as a whole. It would not be possible to do this with just eight Trusts in any case; moreover, since the focus of the research is on the decision processes involved in instances of voluntary turnover, the unit of analysis is the individual leaver. Nonetheless, taken together the Trusts represent a diverse range in terms of location, size and type. There are four medium-sized Trusts, which are each "rural" – in the sense they are not based exclusively in a large city, and four large acute Trusts, each of which comprises a teaching hospital or hospitals. A total of 1,190 surveys were sent out via the Trusts, of these, 368 were returned during the period from the last week in April 2001, to the first week in September 2001. A total of 16 surveys were excluded from the analysis because the respondent was not a nurse (two cases), or because the turnover was involuntary (ten cases), or because there was too much missing data to be able to analyse the responses (four cases). The final sample size is thus 352. Taking into account those surveys that were wrongly addressed and returned, this represents an overall response rate of 31 per cent, which is significantly higher ($p < 0.01$) than in the relevant comparable study (Lee *et al.*, 1999) and high for this kind of survey (Owen and Jones, 1994, p. 313). All respondents were fully qualified (grade D or above) leavers who had voluntarily left in the financial year (April 2000-2001). The vast majority (over 97 per cent) were full time.

Hypotheses

Lee *et al.* (1999) had found strong support for the notion that shocks play an important part in some people's decisions to leave voluntarily. One aim of the study was to test this idea. Successfully replicating this element of their results has implications for understanding organisational change, because if there is evidence that specific events play a substantial role in precipitating thoughts of quitting, and thereby act to "shake employees from their lethargy", then this has implications as to the presentation and management of change initiatives:

H1. Shocks will feature in a substantial number of cases of turnover.

Second, and extending Lee *et al.*'s work, an additional aim was to explore the extent to which a shock had influence over the final decision to quit. Although others (Hom and Kinicki, 2001; Lee *et al.*, 1999) have identified that shocks may cause people to first think about leaving, they have not acknowledged that the shock does not necessarily have to influence the final decision actually to leave. It is possible to imagine a scenario where a shock may prompt thoughts of quitting, but other factors could have more bearing on the ultimate decision to

leave – in other words, the shock is the “last straw”, rather than the reason. For example, a shock (being asked to stay late again) might prompt an initial job search, but other factors could be of greater importance at the time of making the decision to quit, perhaps ongoing levels of dissatisfaction. Although it was anticipated – in line with Hom and Kinicki (2001) and Lee *et al.* (1999) – that such shocks will be influential, it is important to recognise this as an assumption, and test it, given that this theory of turnover is still being developed. A second hypothesis was that (if *H1* holds) shocks will not only prompt thoughts of quitting, but will also have a great degree of influence when it comes to the final decision to quit:

H2. Shocks will be highly influential in terms of the final decision to quit.

Third, it was anticipated that where decisions to quit are associated with a shock, leavers would describe these decisions as more salient, than cases where these decisions are not. This is because when people consider the circumstances surrounding their decision to quit, they are likely to have in mind a particular event, and thus be invoking episodic memory (Wheeler *et al.*, 1997), which is associated with particularly elaborate and detailed recall (Symons and Johnson, 1997, p. 371):

H3. Decisions initiated by shocks will be more salient.

Fourth, it is reasonable to suppose that decisions to leave that have been prompted by a shock are more likely to be described as avoidable than decisions that are not prompted by shock. Commonsensically, if the shock is a single event at work that prompts thoughts of quitting, then leaving decisions initiated by this shock would be avoidable (the event need not have happened). To give a hypothetical example, the imposition without discussion of a new way of working may result in someone quitting. This quit is likely to be construed by the employee who quits as “avoidable” in other words, in terms such as “they did not have to do that”. Equally, however, it is possible that any event that resulted in someone choosing to leave could have been managed better. Continuing with the same hypothetical example, if there is a failure by the organisation to recognise and address concerns arising from the imposed reorganisation, this is also likely to mean the quit is construed as “avoidable” i.e. “having done that, the organisation could have done this” (consulted/reversed the decision/explained the reasons/compensated/ recognised the problem, etc.). This hypothesis is in accordance with the idea that shocks are a way in which leavers are prompted to overcome inertia (Mercer, 1979), and that fundamentally, employees wish to remain in employment (Sheridan and Abelson, 1983). This contrasts with decisions to quit that are not prompted by a single event, and where it is presumably harder for leavers to identify a particular intervention that would prevent their decision:

H4. Decisions initiated by shocks will be more avoidable.

Measures

Shock

A response of yes to the item, “Was there a single, particular event that caused you to *think* about leaving?” was taken as meaning that the respondent had experienced a shock.

Influence over decision

In response to the item, “How much did the event influence your *final* decision to leave?” a five-point Likert scale ranged from 1 “not at all” through 3 “moderate influence” to 5 “overwhelming influence”.

Salience

In response to the item, “At the time I left, it seemed clear to me that I had to decide there and then whether to stay or go” a five-point agree-disagree Likert scale. Agreement was taken to indicate that the decision was salient.

Avoidability

In response to the item, “There are things that the Trust could have done that might have caused me to stay” a five-point agree-disagree Likert scale. Agreement was taken to indicate that the decision was avoidable.

Method

For *H1* and *H2*, it is sufficient to present frequency data: first, showing the number of shocks, and second, a histogram showing the responses to the shock influence item (see Figure 2).

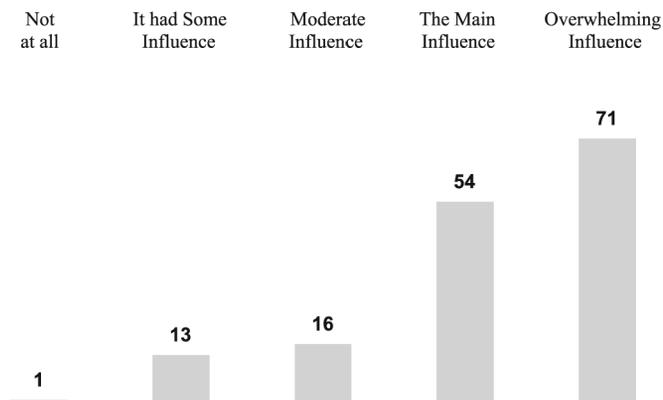
H3 and *H4* involve comparing the means of two groups to see whether there are significant differences. *H3* proposes that decisions to quit that are prompted by a shock are more salient than other types of decision to quit. To do this, a one-tailed, independent samples *t*-test was carried out (Table I). Similarly, *H4* proposes that decisions to quit prompted by a shock are more avoidable than other types of decision to quit. To do this, a one-tailed, independent samples *t*-test (Table II) was carried out.

Results

- *H1* – 156 leavers (44.3 per cent) reported that a single particular event had caused them to first think about leaving.
- *H2* – in addition, most of the shocks were described as 4 – “it was the main influence”, or 5 – “overwhelming influence”.

These results indicate that there is sound support for *H1* and *H2* (one leaver left the “influence” item blank so there are only 155 cases here).

How much did the event influence your final decision to leave?



169

Figure 2. Shock influence

	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (one-tailed)
SALNT ^a	2.332	348	0.010

Notes:

^a Decision saliency

H_0 = saliency is not significantly higher for shock induced quits than for other quits

Table I. Independent samples *t*-test for equality of means

	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (one-tailed)
AV ^a	3.490	348	0.000

Notes:

^a Avoidability

H_0 = avoidability is not significantly higher for shock induced quits than for other quits

Table II. Independent samples *t*-test for equality of means

- H_3 – the results of the first *t*-test (Table I) support the hypothesis that decision saliency is significantly higher in cases where people report a shock.
- H_4 – the results of the second *t*-test (Table II) were also significant; supporting the hypothesis that avoidability is significantly higher in cases where people report a shock.

Discussion

Summary of findings

- Shocks play a role in many cases where people decide to leave.
- Shocks not only prompt initial thoughts about quitting, but also they typically have a substantial influence over the final leaving decision.

- Decisions to quit that are prompted by a shock are typically more salient.
- Decisions to quit that are prompted by a shock are typically more avoidable.

As well as shedding more light on the turnover phenomenon in general, these findings also have particular implications for the way that change is managed within organisations. They point to the need to monitor and understand turnover during periods of change. This research also suggests that where the effects of global change initiatives translate into particular identifiable sources of change (“single, particular events”) for individual employees, it may be more difficult for organisations to prevent such quits, given that these decisions are typically more salient. Nonetheless, leavers also typically describe these decisions as more avoidable, and that suggests that some of the decisions to quit prompted by the introduction of widespread change can be prevented. In light of this, below are offered two principles concerning the implementation of change:

- (1) Measuring turnover should be done at both stages of the decision process: first, at the time initial thoughts of quitting are likely to be prompted; second, after the event to understand and identify leaving patterns. More specifically this signals a need for: surveying/canvassing opinion, emphasising two-way information sharing, consultation processes, intra- and extra-firm career guidance for employees (to gain a sense of how many employees have been “jolted” into thoughts of quitting); using exit interviews and leaver profiling (to gain a sense of how many leaving decisions are specifically due to the way the change process has been implemented).
- (2) Managing turnover should be done in key operational areas: minimising the effects of change to patterns of work in key business areas, and focusing on core business units, perhaps emphasising the elements of continuity, development and progression, rather than change, to try to minimise the incidence of shocks. Where turnover is unavoidable, then it is important to manage the effects of turnover and particularly to seek to minimise indirect costs.

Research agenda

As one element of a suggested research agenda, Figure 3 is offered for consideration. This illustrates the interaction between change and turnover, and shows how this interaction is mediated by the mechanism of shock. This diagram can serve as a heuristic that could be used to guide the development of strategic initiatives. It could also inform the rationale for measures of turnover, thereby improving assessment of the impact of change on employees. Figure 3 follows from the acceptance of several assumptions. Each of the assumptions is

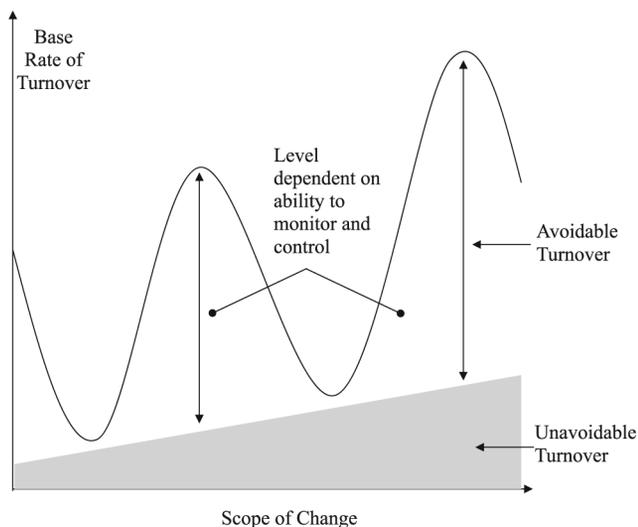


Figure 3.
Theorised relationship
between organisational
change and turnover

phrased below in the form of a testable hypothesis, and these more formally offer a suggested agenda for research:

- (1) As change increases, the number of shock-induced quits will increase.
- (2) There will always be a base level of *unavoidable* turnover, which will increase as the overall level of change increases.
- (3) However, some of the decisions to quit will also be *avoidable*, in other words, they could be reduced by intervention.
- (4) In a time of change, there will be scope to manage turnover effectively, by selectively reducing the level of avoidable quits through informed intervention.

Conclusion

Understanding voluntary turnover is important because when people choose to leave there are multiple direct and indirect costs (Dess and Shaw, 2001). Firms that implement change should be aware that this may result in increased turnover, partly because changes in the pattern of work are likely to result in a greater incidence of shocks. As well as understanding the role that shocks play in quitting (Lee *et al.*, 1999), firms need to be aware of the avoidability of turnover (Campion, 1991). This represents the scope for intervention. Greater understanding of turnover, can allow for targeted intervention. Three scenarios illustrate the importance of appreciating avoidability during change:

- (1) If turnover is mainly unavoidable, then leavers are “necessary casualties” of change and the cost of change (increased turnover) can

be weighed up against the supposed benefits. In this case the organisation should pursue a control paradigm, seeking to manage the effects of turnover *post hoc*, rather than spuriously intervene, which would be simply “chasing shadows”.

- (2) If change results in avoidable turnover, there is a “charge of the Light Brigade” – a futile and needless loss of valuable employees. In this case the organisation should pursue a prevention paradigm, where successful intervention could militate against the effects of change, thus “bringing the troops back home”.
- (3) Where there is a mix of avoidable and unavoidable turnover, the internal impact of change can be difficult to ascertain. In this case there is room for improvement and neither a pure control nor prevention paradigm would be appropriate, but there is a need for sophisticated measures of turnover, to help managers operating in the “fog of war”.

Firms should simultaneously measure and manage turnover. Measuring involves such things as: surveys, consultation processes, intra- and extra-firm career guidance, exit interviews and leaver profiling. Managing is needed in key operational areas to minimise the effects of change to key business areas. Both elements are important to negotiate the complexities inherent in implementing widespread change.

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